

The 'War' on Terrorism

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By Ramesh Thakur

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Ramesh Thakur, vice rector (Peace and Governance) at United Nations University in Tokyo and a specialist on security issues. These are his personal views.

Dr. Thakur argues that terrorism is a global problem, and that the attack on the United States was an attack on the whole world community. He maintains that therefore the response cannot be unilateral, but must involve forging alliances with other countries to enforce international laws and norms.

II. Essay by Ramesh Thakur

The "war" on terrorism

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On Tuesday September 11, global terrorism struck in the homeland and at the headquarters of globalization. Hyper-terrorism laid bare the vulnerability of hyper-power. The targets were the symbols of economic vitality and the citadel of freedom.

The split-screen TV images - the World Trade Center alongside the Pentagon, with rolling news headlines along the bottom of the screen - are a metaphor for the dividing split in history: the age of innocence before, and the world of postmodern terror after.

In their innocence, Americans had embraced the illusion of security behind supposedly impregnable lines of continental defense. To be sure, the U.S. too had suffered acts of terror. But not as a daily fear, an everyday reality, a way of life that has become commonplace for so many people in so many other countries over the past few decades. And no one, anywhere, had suffered terrorist carnage on such a devastating, mind-numbing scale. This must be one of the worst, if not the worst, days of casualty suffered by Americans on a single day, in peace or in war.

Like the two world wars, the "war" on terrorism is a war from which America can neither stay disengaged, nor win on its own, nor one that can be won without full U.S. engagement. America has been the most generous nation in the world in responding to emergencies and crises everywhere else. Now that the attack has happened on the American heartland, Americans should be heartened by the spontaneous, warm and overwhelming response from everyone else. The world has grieved and suffered and mourned along with Americans, even while not wishing to intrude on the privacy of their grief.

The sheer scale of the horror has generated unprecedented sympathy for the U.S. All allies and many others have already expressed full support, which has been warmly welcomed by Washington. This should encourage and help Washington to re-engage with the global community, not disengage still more. Secure in their sustaining belief in exceptionalism, in being a virtuous power, Americans have not been prepared to hold themselves to international norms and standards that they wish to set in place for everyone else, from greenhouse gases that cause global warming to landmines, missile defense and the pursuit of universal justice.

The in-your-face rejection of global norms and regimes has been one of the defining attributes of the George W. Bush administration so far. Now there is a fresh opportunity to rededicate the terms of American engagement with the international community in protecting the world from deadly new threats immune to conventional tools of statecraft. The nation of laws must turn its power to the task of building a world ruled by law.

Osama bin Laden's genius has been to fuse the fervor of religious schools (madrassas), the rallying power of the call to a holy war (jihad), the cult of martyrdom through suicide (shahid), the mastery of modern technology, and the networking opportunity of globalization.

President Bush has declared that the U.S. will make no distinction between the terrorists and those who harbor them. Nor must Washington make a distinction between "our" terrorists and "theirs", condoning or tolerating one lot while isolating and battling another. For security from the fear of terrorism is truly indivisible. How many of today's radical extremists, embracing terror against a host of countries, are yesterday's "freedom fighters" trained, armed and financed by the West as jihadis against the former enemy? How interconnected is the terrorists' network, how overlapping their cause? Washington must not fall into the trap, only too distressingly common in their past, of converting terror on America into terror against the world, but terrorist attacks elsewhere are merely local problems to be solved by the countries concerned. Global cooperation is not a one-way relationship: it requires long-term commitment on all sides.

In the war against fundamentalist terrorism, past enemies can be today's allies. The concert of democracies must cooperate politically and coordinate responses with one another's law-enforcement and military forces. They must forge alliances if necessary to work around the institutionalized reluctance of global organizations to respond effectively and in time to real threats instead of posturing over imaginary grievances.

Black Tuesday's attacks also shatter the illusion of casualty-free battles. Washington can no longer shirk from the global war on terrorism for fear of putting its soldiers' lives at risk.

U.S. security experts will examine closely the procedural and organizational flaws that allowed the planes to be hijacked and the intelligence failures that enabled it all to be plotted without detection. Other security measures will also be put in place. But in the end there can be no absolute security against suicide terrorists who know no limits to their audacity, imagination and inhumanity.

Americans must also ask why they have so many enemies, why they are the object of so much

hatred. Is all of it the price they have to pay for being the world's most successful, powerful and wealthy nation? Or can some of it at least be muted by adopting policies that are more measured and tempered in dispensing justice more evenly? Fanaticism feeds on grievance, and grievance is nurtured by deeply felt injustice. This is as true of Kashmiris and Tamils as it is of Palestinians. Terror is the weapon of choice of those who harbor the sense of having been wronged, are too weak to do anything about it through conventional means, but are motivated enough to seek vengeance by other means.

Whatever else they may have been, the suicide terrorists responsible for Black Tuesday's attacks were not cowards. To the contrary, they were exceptional in their courage, commitment and steel of resolve, even if it was harnessed to an evil end. President Bush spoke of an "unyielding anger" in his first broadcast to the nation. Americans really must realize that they are not exceptional in such human emotions. The fury and vengeance of others festers in deeply wounded collective psyche.

That is why also terrorism cannot be contained by expensive space-based shields against missile attacks. Modern military forces and security policies should be configured for threats rooted in the new security agenda.

If isolationism is not an option in today's interdependent world, unilateralism cannot be the strategy of choice either. Just as America is a nation of laws that find expression in institutions, so Americans should work to construct a world of laws functioning through international institutions. That is why the concert of democracies to combat terrorism cannot be a closed circle but must embrace all those willing to join in the fight against threats to a civilized community of nations.

Americans rightly reject moral equivalence between their own "virtuous" power and their "evil" enemies. They should now reflect on their own propensity toward political ambivalence between the perpetrators of terrorism and the efforts of legitimate governments to maintain national security and assure public safety.

The end of complacency about terrorism in the American heartland should encourage Washington to view other countries' parallel wars against terrorism through the prism of a fellow-government facing agonizing policy choices in the real world, rather than single issue NGOs whose vision is not anchored in any responsibility for policy decisions. Some governments have been at the receiving end of moral and political judgments about robust responses to violent threats posed to their authority and order from armed dissidents. They are entitled to and should now expect, not a free hand, but a more mature understanding - an understanding forged in the crucible of shared suffering.

This does not give any government a license to kill. To defeat the terrorists, it is absolutely critical that the symbolism of America - not just the home of the free and the land of the brave, but liberty, freedom, equality between citizens and rulers, democracy, and a nation of laws - be kept alive. That is a shared vision. That is why we were all the symbolic target of the attacks and why we must join forces with the Americans to rid succeeding generations of the scourge of terrorism. Not blinded by hatred and a lust for revenge, but ennobled by the vision of a just order and empowered by the majesty of law, as President Bush has affirmed.

Although the monuments to American power and prosperity have been rocked to their foundations, the foundation of a civilized discourse among the family of nations must not be destroyed - for that would give victory to the terrorists. What do the terrorists want? More than anything else, they want to polarize the world into hard divisions, to break harmony into strife, to replace the community of civilized countries with the flames of hatred between peoples. Will they succeed? Only if we let them.

Individual terrorism should not provoke mass intolerance. The best way to honor victims is to recognize our common humanity and work for peace in and through justice. Islamic terrorists are no more representative of Islam than the IRA terrorists are of Christianity (or for that matter than Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, if their reported statements are true), or the Hindu fanatics who destroyed the mosque in Ayodhya are of Hinduism.

The world is united in the demand that those responsible for the atrocities of Black Tuesday must be found and brought to justice as quickly as possible. However, for the sake of our common future, we must not allow reason to be overwhelmed by grief and fear, judgment to be drowned in shock and anger at the terrorist action; we must not brand all followers of any particular faith our common enemy. Just as there co-exist many ways of thinking and many different value systems within the "West," so there are many who daily honor Islam against the tiny minority who sometimes dishonor it, or any other religion, or none at all.

The fight against terrorism is a war with no frontiers, against enemies who know no borders and have no scruples. If we abandon our scruples, we descend to their level. Instead we must talk to and welcome into the concert of civilized communities believers in moral values from all faiths.

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