“War on Terrorism: Implications for Asia”

Recommended Citation

Ralph Cossa, "“War on Terrorism: Implications for Asia”", Special Policy Forum 9/11, September 17, 2001, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/war-on-terrorism-implications-for-asia/

September 17, 2001

By Ralph Cossa

I. Introduction

This article was contributed by Ralph A. Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS [pacforum@lava.net], a Honolulu-based non-profit research institute affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and senior editor of Comparative Connections, a quarterly electronic journal [www.csis.org/pacfor].

Cossa reviews the likely effects on Asia of the recent terrorist attacks. He argues that US allies in Asia need to stand by any US actions, but will not likely be called on to provide troops. He also argues that the attacks provide an opportunity for the PRC and the DPRK to improve their relations with the US through support of the international fight against terrorism. He concludes that there is no reason to believe that increased US attention on the Middle East will reduce its security commitments in Asia.

II. Essay by Ralph Cossa

"'War on Terrorism': Implications for Asia" by Ralph A. Cossa

It is too soon to speculate on the nature of American retaliation for the 11 September terrorist attacks on our nation, since neither the organizers nor collaborators have been clearly identified. However, the Pentagon has made it clear that the response will not be a single strike but a "broad and sustained campaign" not only against terrorists but against those who support them. As a result, it is not too soon to be asking what Washington might ask of its allies and friends in Asia. The European response has been unequivocal; invoking Article 5 of the NATO Charter clears the way for NATO support for, if not direct participation in, any U.S. military response. It appears unlikely that the U.S. would call on any of its Asia-Pacific allies -- Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand -- to participate directly in any planned retaliatory military operation, although some (especially the Aussies) may offer to do so. America's Asia allies must be prepared unequivocally to stand behind any U.S. reaction, however, and to provide logistical support if needed.

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi has already gone on record stating that Japan "will spare no effort in providing assistance and cooperation" in support of America's war on terrorism. However, even providing logistical support may necessitate some reinterpretation of Japan's self-imposed ban against collective self defense -- the fact that Japanese citizens were among those killed in New York should provide additional incentive, and perhaps even justification, for such an effort.

North Korea has joined South Korea in condemning the terrorist action against the United States and ROK President Kim Dae-jung has proposed that the two Korean states adopt a joint resolution opposing terrorism at ongoing high-level North-South talks. North Korea should seize this opportunity. Increased world attention on states that sponsor terrorism might also provide Pyongyang with the extra push needed to take the actions necessary to remove itself from this list, including the expulsion of Japanese Red Army terrorists who have enjoyed safe haven in the North for decades.

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Washington is likely to seek (and receive) greater cooperation in its international fight against terrorism. This is one area where U.S. and Chinese strategic objectives clearly overlap. China, like Russia, has strongly condemned the attacks and appears willing to work more closely with the U.S. to combat international terrorism, although it remains to be seen if this will include support for, much less participation in, strikes against countries who harbor terrorists. The distinction between "interference in one's internal affairs" and eliminating safe havens used by those who have interfered in America's internal affairs in a most horrific way has yet to be made by Beijing.

In identifying those responsible, great care must be taken to separate condemnation of Islamic (or any other type of) extremism from Islam itself. Moslem nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia have joined their East Asian neighbors in strongly condemning last Tuesday's terrorist attack. But, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir is already arguing against retaliation. Such actions reinforce rather than break the link between the extremists and the moderate Islamic community.

Finally, some have questioned how the events of September 11 will affect America's security commitment in Asia. The Far Eastern Economic Review has speculated that the attacks could threaten Washington's "willingness to undergird the region's often shaky security," that the security of shipping through the Malacca Strait has somehow been "thrown into question" and that the Spratlys "suddenly seemed more vulnerable" as the U.S. 7th Fleet "went into self-defense mode." This is absolute nonsense. The sustained deployment of 500,000 U.S. military forces during DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM a decade ago did not result in any diminution of America's security commitment toward Asia; nor should a decision to focus on countering terrorism emanating from the Middle East.

Rather than resulting in a more hard line position toward China and North Korea, as the FEER article speculates, an opportunity for greater cooperation between Washington and Beijing and perhaps even with Pyongyang has been created. What we are most likely to see is not the "opening up of a power vacuum" in Asia but a tendency of America's friends and allies to rally around the U.S. in Asia as they have globally.

Allow me to close on a more personal note. I have been deeply touched by the expressions of sympathy and support streaming in by phone, fax, and Email from colleagues throughout Asia. This was not just an attack on America, it was an attack against humanity. Many nationalities, races, and religions are represented among the dead and missing. Americans and Asians, together with the vast majority of humankind, grieve over this tragic, senseless loss of human life.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/war-on-terrism-implications-for-asia/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org