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THE CAPTURE OF KHALID SHEIKH MOHAMMAD

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At the beginning of March, American-Pakistani security cooperation resulted in the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the operational commander of the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States. President George Bush, Jr., described this development as a "fantastic achievement," and it is undoubtedly a major accomplishment for the United States and its allies in their war against international terrorism, in general, and al-Qaeda and its associated terror networks, in particular. For while Khalid Sheikh's capture is but the latest in a long series of arrests stretching over the last eighteen months of terror activists, including senior operatives from al-Qaeda and other organizations supported by it, it is nevertheless much more significant than any that went before it, in terms of both symbolic and operational implications.

In the struggle against international terrorism, symbolic victories are extremely important in raising morale and demonstrating the ability of governments to cope with what world public opinion sees as the virtually unlimited capacity of terrorists to strike at defenseless targets whenever they want. The symbolic value of capturing Khalid Sheikh Mohammad is therefore no less significant than is its operational value. For it sends an unambiguous signal to Americans who have been watching the provocative media

performances of Usama bin Laden, still on the loose since September 11 and still threatening to inflict mass casualties, that whoever harms them will be hunted down and made to pay the price. It also signals the capability of the American security forces to disrupt and respond, thus strengthening public confidence that real power and determination lie behind President's Bush's declarations of an uncompromising war against international terror. This same message is also conveyed to various terrorist organizations around the world, including al-Qaeda, and to states supporting terrorism.

Khalid Sheikh's arrest was the result of close cooperation between American and Pakistani security agencies, and that clearly points to international intelligence and operational cooperation as the only way of dealing effectively with the international terrorist threat. It is particularly noteworthy that the main American partner in the fight against al-Qaeda and its offshoots is that same Pakistan whose previous support for the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda make it possible for the "Afghan" terror industry to flourish in the international arena.

For American security agencies, bogged down since September 11 in a long, exhausting and frustrating hunt for the ghosts of international terrorism, the arrest of Khalid Sheikh not only

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provides a major boost to morale but also constitutes a serious blow to the "Afghani" terrorist alumni that set for themselves the objective of killing as many Americans as possible, at home or abroad. This network, under the command of Ramzi Yusif (who is Khalid Sheikh Mohammad's nephew), was responsible for the attempt to explode the World Trade Center in 1993. In 1995, those same two conspired to plan a major campaign aimed at blowing up about a dozen American aircraft en route from Southeast Asia to the United States. They also planned to dispatch a suicide pilot to crash into CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia. But while Ramzi Yusif and other conspirators were arrested, Khalid Sheikh managed to get away, and since 1996, he has featured on the FBI most wanted list. But rather than abandoning the terror business, he studied the lessons of those failures, and in September 2001, he directed and commanded, on behalf of al-Qaeda, the terrorist attack that combined two operations into one massive assault. As such, he is directly responsible for the death of over three thousand people.

Khalid Sheikh's arrest may well help expose his organizational infrastructure, communications, and operating methods. It could also reveal information he has kept to himself, and more information may be gleaned from the documents and equipment in his possession seized during his arrest. These could help preempt future terrorist attacks.

Khalid Sheikh did not rest on his laurels even after September 11 but continued to plan and direct a world-wide terrorist campaign. He was behind several particularly ambitious operations, including the abortive attack in December 2001 that intended to use seven truck-bombs to blow up the American, British, and Israeli Embassies and several American company headquarters in downtown Singapore, as well as the use of a suicide-driver of a car-bomb to blow up a synagogue in Jerba, Tunisia, in April 2002.

Khalid Sheikh may also have been implicated in the October 2002 bombing in Bali, Indonesia, that resulted in the death of over 200 people.

His arrest therefore constitutes a serious blow to al-Qaeda, which has lost its most experienced operational commander and the one with the most extensive network of contacts. Khalid Sheikh's interrogation and the investigation of the materials found in his possession are likely to tighten the ring around other commanders in the organization and may even turn up information about the location of bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri – thought they can certainly be expected to change their hiding place.

This event has refocused public attention on the threat posed by terrorism to the stability of the international system. That has particular resonance in an era characterized by non-conventional terrorism, that is, by terrorism carried out with conventional means but with "non-conventional" results (as in September 11), or even by acts of "mega-terrorism" using non-conventional means.

However, the arrest of one senior operative, however prominent, does not constitute an end to the threat but rather just one stage in a prolonged effort to cope with a problem that has been neglected for many years. That effort now entails a world-wide, comprehensive and systematic campaign with intelligence, judicial, economic and diplomatic dimensions. One of its requirements is a reformulation of behavioral norms and rules in international relations that would permit action, not only against the terrorists themselves, but also against states supporting terrorism, whether actively or just "passively" (by allowing terrorists to be present in or to act freely from their territory). This may well be the next challenge facing President Bush after Iraq. And to meet it, he will need the same kind of cooperation from other allies as he received from Pakistan in the arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad.