The War on Terror: United We Stand?

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*D*espite initial expectations, a unified international front against terrorism did not form following the attacks of September 11. The articulation of counter-terrorism policies has remained as it has always been – subject to states' particular calculations of interest. This, however, should not have come as a surprise. Perceptions of terrorist threats, as well as considerations as to how to rise to meet them, reflect intertwined normative and political judgments on the part of a given state's political leadership. As such, they are essentially subjective.

States appear to be expected to deal with terrorism according to internationally accepted and obligatory standards, whether they are directly targeted or not. Underlying this expectation is a supposition that terrorism is somehow unique: that unlike other security dilemmas, it features qualities that are somehow above or beyond specific national, regional or cultural contexts. Hence, it was expected that such standards could, and even should, be established. However, this has not happened. Rather, it seems that the attacks of September 11 did not decrease the persistent diversity among different governments'

approaches toward terrorism-related threats.

The question therefore arises: is there any substantial reason to expect that different governments would

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address terrorism in the same way and with the same degree of determination, regardless of situational particularities? Aiming at answering this question, and particularly at challenging the view of terrorism as a threat that is somehow divorced from the context in which individual states function, this article shall suggest an alternative outlook. It shall postulate that terrorism is necessarily dependent on the perspective of the beholder. Terrorism-related threats, like other security challenges, are perceived through the perspective of a given state's particular interests and culture.

These perspectives are thus particularist, and hence both threat perceptions and the responses formulated to counteract them tend to vary from case to case. Governments therefore cannot be expected to address the issue of terrorism regardless of context. In order to illustrate the relative essence of terrorism-related challenges, the discussion that follows shall refer to the divergence of counter-terrorism actions, as have been adopted over the years by various US Administrations. In conclusion, several questions are raised as to the decisiveness of the offensive in Afghanistan with regard to its declared goal, namely: curbing terrorism and thereby thwarting related threats to American security.

Relative Threat Perceptions

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, which had an instantly galvanizing (if not unifying) impact around the globe, the US Administration declared a war on terrorism. Preparing for the military phase of the war, the Bush Administration focused on the constitution of a coalition of states against international terrorism. The coalition was intended to be as

sweeping as possible, to provide the necessary legitimacy for an all-out battle against Bin Laden's Al-Qa'ida, which was held responsible for the attacks. Also targeted by the US was the organization's hosting government – the Taliban regime in Kabul. The international front that the US sought to create was meant to transcend regional and religious boundaries, so as to rule out any interpretation of the coming strike as war against the Islamic world in its entirety. Having delineated the coalition, the US sought to make it clear that while Afghanistan was the location of its campaign, neither Afghanistan itself nor the Afghani people were the intended targets.

Besides rage and frustration, underlying the counter-terrorism drive was the premise that the catastrophe of September 11 marked a new era, in terms of both terrorism-related threats and in terms of proper responses to them. The threat, of course, appeared rather obvious in the wake of September 11. Targeting archetypal symbols of American economic and military might, located in densely populated areas inside the US, Islamic zealotry appeared to have crossed a risky threshold of no turning back. There was a sense that, unless resolutely addressed, this threat foretold a dark future for western civilization as a whole. Moreover, quelling the threat posed by Al-Qa'ida appeared to have a clear operational logic: military retaliation would both thwart future attacks by Bin Laden, and discourage further terrorist schemes by

others that were feared to be waiting in the wings. The number and diversity of governments that supported the US-led enterprise, or at least did not explicitly renounce it, was indeed unprecedented, reflecting awareness of the likely strategic ramifications of not cooperating. The offensive that was mounted in order to destroy Al-Qa'ida's infrastructure and topple the Taliban regime was larger in both scope and volume than most recent campaigns against terrorism.

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Before too long, however, inconsistencies that cropped up between rhetoric and practice raised doubts as to the validity of initial appraisals (which were influenced by the initial shock of the attacks themselves): that the international community was indeed facing a new era in its approach to terrorism-related politics. Rather than forming up in solid ranks, the *ad hoc* coalition revealed diverse degrees of commitment to the declared goal of combating terrorism. In fact, despite initial appearances, the shaky coalition echoed past difficulties encountered

when attempting to construct enduring multilateral fronts against 'terrorism.' Governments around the globe were not convinced that their particular interests should be forfeited or reassessed in order to advance counter-terrorism objectives that were themselves devised first and foremost in accordance with American directives and interests. Doubts were also raised concerning the aptness of the massive move to advance its declared objectives of forestalling further terrorist threats.

Though 'terrorism' has been high on the global agenda for nearly four decades – the result of the mounting frequency and lethality of terrorism in the international sphere – terrorism-related threats have remained open to different, sometimes contesting interpretations. Consequently, efforts on the part of various international forums to formulate a definition of terrorism that would establish grounds for binding counter-terrorism action proved rather ineffectual. This basic picture has not changed following the attacks of September 11.

It is often argued that terrorism is simply an immoral mode of warfare, which falls beyond the pale of accepted international practice. Viewed from this perspective, all-out war against terrorism needs no further justification. In this light, international cooperation in combating terrorism is advocated not only as a prerequisite for success, but also as a moral duty. Nevertheless, attempts to subordinate practices of states and institutions to the view of terrorism as nothing but a

moral challenge have persistently failed, implying that both terrorism and what should be done about it are not entirely self-evident. This is not to say that terrorism is detached from moral connotations. After all, any assessment of this mode of warfare – particularly when the threat is directly encountered – is inspired by normative preferences.

However, this does not mean that 'terrorism' cannot be defined. One possible definition, which seems to have a fairly inclusive scope, defines terrorism as the use of illegitimate or unauthorized violence for the purpose of advancing political goals by non-state actors. Of course, underlying this definition is the premise that terrorism is "illegal" and "illegitimate." With that, it must be recalled that the standards as to what is "legal" or "legitimate" and what is not are set by established states and state-associated institutions, which enjoy the power to define the parameters of the political discourse, and thus of the order from which their power is derived. While it may not be surprising that states would quickly come to the position that anti-state violence is illegitimate, that does not mean that this determination should be accorded any independent or absolute ontological status.

In any case, it appears that it is not the inability to reach a definition of terrorism and an 'accurate' understanding of the threat that prevents states from joining a unified counter-terrorism front. Rather, governments appear to refrain from

endorsing an internationally accepted definition of terrorism because they are reluctant to commit themselves in advance to acting according to directives that could challenge other interests on their strategic agenda. Because of their particular perspectives, governments and institutions tend to disagree regarding causes of terrorism, implied threats, what it takes to combat terrorism, the price of counteraction, and even the presumed cost of refraining from action. They

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also tend to disagree over whether specific instances of terrorism should be addressed by military or diplomatic modes of response, or by a combination of the two. Hence, as a rule, cooperation has in the past been reached regarding specific terrorism-related issues, such as threats to civil aviation, but not with regard to 'terrorism' itself. International cooperation in combating terrorism also tends to be especially effective and lasting when established on bilateral, rather than multilateral bases.

Different threat perceptions and

cost-benefit calculations regarding counteraction have produced a diversity of approaches toward the challenges faced not only among states but by the same state as well. The US Administration reacted as it did to the attacks of September 11 not only because it was an attack falling within the State Department's definition of terrorism, but because of the specific nature and scope of the attacks. After all, the US, as symbol of western global ascendance, has been the principal target of international terrorism for several decades. As such, it has been a champion of global firmness against terrorism and state sponsorship of terrorism. But the US has never reacted in a manner even approaching that of the present campaign in Afghanistan following *any* terrorist attack, no matter how spectacular in scope. From time to time the US has resorted to military retaliation, as it did with the air strike against Libya in 1986. However, the 1983 attack against the marine headquarters in Beirut was responded to with only a minor military reaction, and ultimately led to the removal of the American forces from Lebanon – effectively according Hizballah and Syria the outcome that they were seeking. In the case of the 1993 attack by Islamic fundamentalists against the World Trade Center, US responses were legal and political only; no military reaction was conducted against states hosting the organization with which the perpetrating terrorists were affiliated.

Notably, bones of strategic

contention between the US and those states considered by the State Department as sponsors of terrorism go beyond the issues related to terrorism. Similarly, some states whose governments clearly engage in terrorism – at least according to technical definitions of the term — have been absent from the list. Thus, simply engaging in terrorist acts has never been the sole criterion for inclusion in the State Department's List of State Sponsors of Terrorism, which constitutes a legal basis for the imposition of diplomatic and economic sanctions. In the case of the war in Afghanistan, the US seems to have reacted to a composite strategic challenge, not just against 'terror' – notwithstanding CNN-style headlines and photomontages trumpeting a 'War on Terror.' Indeed, the resoluteness and scope of the US offensive in Afghanistan were nothing at all like previous counter-terrorism efforts, and more closely resembled campaigns waged in defense of wider American interests – like the 1991 Gulf War. Interestingly enough, at an advanced stage of the war, even CNN's characterization of events changed – the 'War on Terror' became the 'War in Afghanistan.'

If terrorism *per se* had really been the sole issue on the agenda, then it would have been out of place for the US to find fault with states that declined to pledge unequivocal support for the offensive due to considerations related to the threat of terrorism on their domestic fronts. However, the US in fact showed little

sympathy for Egyptian and Saudi concerns with internal Islamic militancy, which led them to refrain from total support for the offensive in Afghanistan. In the first few months following the September 11 attacks, the Administration was also rather critical of Israel's insistence on pursuing its counter-terrorism drive, while ignoring consequent problems for enlisting Arab support for the American offensive. But terrorism *per se* was not the case. The lethality of the

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attacks of September 11, coupled with the fact that they were carried out on the US mainland, elevated them to the level of war, redefined war to include terrorism, and as seen from Washington DC, also justified marginalization of terrorism-related threats that other states faced. As said, this should not have surprised anyone. *As prior to September 11, terrorism is accorded meaning not by a formal definition but rather by the perceived acuteness of the threat, which is not subject to objective standards.* This logic, of course, applies to the articulation of responses to it as well.

Perspectives

As said, underlying the counter-terrorism drive was the premise that only firm responses to terrorist attacks could counteract the potentially catastrophic propensities of terrorism as a whole. However, as opposed to sub-state organizations that use violent struggle so as to be acknowledged by the prevailing global system, Al-Qa'ida and like-minded organizations seek to express their antagonism to western values and power and to instigate war between the Muslim world and the West. Lacking inhibitions that stem from a desire to remain acceptable in the eyes of the West, they are likely to perpetuate efforts to accomplish these interim and long-term goals. *Even so, The attacks of September 11 have demonstrated that while terrorists have overcome inhibitions regarding mass destruction and killing, their aim could be attained by disastrous yet still conventional, not necessarily unconventional means.* Also, it appears safe to presume that *while the war in Afghanistan may well undermine the operational capabilities of Islamic zealots and deter states from harboring and sponsoring their organizational infrastructures at least temporarily, it is unlikely to undermine their underlying motivations. Conversely, the war in Afghanistan may well perpetuate anti-American sentiments and therefore prompt further terrorist acts in the long term.*

Moreover, threats to American interests emanating from the current 'War on Terror' may not be confined

to the sphere of terrorism. Internal threats to the stability of pro-western Arab regimes due to their reluctant (yet still discernible) acquiescence with the offensive in Afghanistan could in the long run challenge American interests which call for stability in the Middle East. Efforts that were conducted by the Bush Administration in order to co-opt states like Iran, which has practiced international terrorism, into the counter-terrorism coalition could benefit American strategic positions in the Gulf region. However, the accommodating approaches taken with regard to Iran and Pakistan – the latter having already developed an independent nuclear capability — could also be read as a measure of approval for practices that could ultimately prove disadvantageous for western and particularly American security.

As to the prospects for constituting a solid international front against terrorism, the aftermath of the attacks of September 11 has shown that these are still rather dim. Terrorism-related

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threats and determinants of response are essentially similar to other dilemmas on which governments often disagree, like issues of borders, security concerns and global economic and ecological challenges. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, cooperation in combating terrorism was set as a litmus test for strategic alliance with the US. However, the complexity of establishing international cooperation on other, no less complex issues, such as arms control or the unconventional arms race, must give us pause. True, many states have compelling interests in fighting terror, but international cooperation in general is an elusive goal, even in cases where states' interests converge. Given that this is so, we must ask ourselves: why would the establishment of committed international cooperation against terrorism, or even against the horrifying potential of unconventional terrorism, be any easier?