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INTO YEAR SEVEN

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September marked the beginning of the seventh year of the “war on terror” that followed the suicide attacks of 11 September 2001. Contrary to expectations in Washington at that time, there is now every sign that the war will extend at least into a second decade and perhaps beyond. Because of this it is relevant to go back to the early responses to the attacks, to compare expectations with outcomes and to assess the possibility of major changes in policy after six years. It is a theme explored in the recently published Oxford Research Group International Security Report 2007, *Towards Sustainable Security: Alternatives to the War on Terror*.

War the Only Option?

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks there was widespread sympathy for the people of the United States and what they had experienced. This was particularly strong in Europe, where substantial political opinion supported the idea of a vigorous response directed primarily at the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In harbouring al-Qaida and its leader, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban regime was implicated indirectly in the atrocities – indeed while bin Laden was immediately dubbed the “Public Enemy No. 1” in the United States, the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, was second on the list.

The war in Afghanistan began within four weeks of 9/11 and although limited attempts had been made in those four weeks to extricate bin Laden from the protection of the Taliban, the start of the war was determined primarily by the logistics of getting military forces in place and starting the process of supporting the Northern Alliance, rather than negotiating with the Taliban. The Northern Alliance connection became a key part of the strategy, with its re-arming aimed at altering the balance of power in the Afghan civil war against the Taliban regime in Kabul.

What was clear, immediately following 9/11, was that the Bush administration was certain to respond with heavy military force and even in the first couple of months there were indications that the administration was contemplating extending the war to include regime termination in Iraq. While that did not come to the fore until President Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002, with its identification of an “axis of evil”, it was clear that the administration saw the attacks as presenting a fundamental threat to the concept of a New American Century. This necessarily required a formidable response in order not only to ensure the security of the country but also its role as world leader.

Although most western states accepted the policy of regime termination in Afghanistan, not all analysts took this view. Indeed there was a minority outlook in some western countries that cautioned against such a response and proposed, instead, a response predicated much more on the rule of law. This was, moreover, a much more widespread view in the majority world away from the countries of the North Atlantic community.

An analysis published by Oxford Research Group immediately after the 9/11 attacks (*The United States, Europe and the Majority World After 11 September*, October 2001) argued against a strong military response and quoted a perceptive paper by Walden Bello, Director of Focus on the Global South in the Philippines. Bello condemned the attacks as horrific, despicable and unpardonable but cautioned against what he called an automatic “iron fist” response that ignored the underlying context. He pointed to the frequent use of indiscriminate force by the United States, not least in Vietnam and to the bitter mood throughout much of the Middle East and South West Asia, directed partly at the United States because of its perceived dominance of the region but also against autocratic states dependent on continuing US support. Bello concluded:

The only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for Washington to address not the symptoms but the roots of terrorism. It is for the United States to re-examine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting for a change arrangements that will not stand in the way of the achievement of equity, justice and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples. Any other way leads to endless war. (Walden Bello, *Endless War*, Focus on the Global South, September 2001)

This view found no favour in Washington, since it represented a fundamental contradiction to the prevailing “control” paradigm. Instead, the ORG report predicted that:

Over the next months, and probably years, military action will seek to destroy the people and supporting network of those presumed responsible for the atrocities of 11 September, and will probably seek also to destroy the Taliban regime in Kabul. In the view of the more hard-line security advisers in the Bush administration, action should also be taken against Iraq and other supporters of anti-American terrorism.

For the bin Laden network and its associates, such a strong military counter-reaction will have been anticipated and will almost certainly be welcomed... They will anticipate very forceful military action and they will expect it to lead to civilian casualties and huge movements of refugees, to instability in Pakistan, to an increasing anti-American mood in the Middle East and to more support for their own cause...

In short, the United States will engage in a sustained war against the paramilitaries, who will see this as one more stage in a cycle of violence that will serve their longer-term strategy of forcing the United States from the Gulf region and bringing about the collapse of the elites of the region that they so bitterly oppose. (p.13)

War Aims

These and other views had no impact on the US strategy, and over the period through to early 2003, there evolved clear-cut aims for the war on terror. It is worthwhile recalling the strong and confident expectations in Washington at that time, in order to contrast them with the actual developments. They help give us some understanding of how difficult it may be for the United States to develop a new approach in the face of the difficulties now being experienced. What was expected through the response to the 9/11 attacks were three broad outcomes.

Al-Qaida The Taliban regime in Afghanistan would be terminated and the al-Qaida movement would be greatly weakened and dispersed. It was confidently expected that Osama bin Laden and other leaders would be killed or captured. While it was not expected that the al-Qaida movement would be defeated in the conventional sense, it was certainly expected to wither away to the point where it was of little consequence. Afghanistan would make a transition to a stable pro-western country with a long-term US military presence to ensure the security of the state. A consequence of the war would also be the establishment of military bases in key states in Central Asia, notably Uzbekistan. This would have the long-term advantage to the United States of developing influence in a region that was rich in fossil fuels, especially oil, was at that time more under the influence of Russia and could potentially be subject to Chinese overtures.

Iraq The termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq would be rapid, largely due to a “shock and awe” air assault accompanied by a rapid intervention by highly mobile and well-armed ground forces. Most Iraqis would see this as liberation, not occupation. With the Saddam Hussein regime terminated, Iraq would rapidly make a transition to a very pro-American state, developing a free market economy with a minimum of regulation. In many ways it would become a model for the kind of open market that was required across the region. It would be opened up to international investment and its immense oil

reserves would be secure. There would be a long-term US military presence at a small number of bases, and while the troop numbers would be modest, the capability for rapid reinforcement through US Central Command would ensure the long-term security of the country.

There is a tendency to claim that the insurgency developed in Iraq because the United States had done little in terms of post-regime planning, but this is far from accurate. In the first year of the insurgency, the Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer had a very clear idea of what was appropriate for Iraq. Many steps were taken to ensure that there would be an exceptionally liberal economic environment and there was a real confidence that the constraints on the market that existed in the United States, not least through organised labour, would be avoided in Iraq, with the result that the country would rapidly become a beacon for the free market.

Iran The regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq would greatly constrain Iran. Indeed, this key member of the “axis of evil” would be so limited by the fundamental changes in the states to its east and west that it would become a compliant state unwilling to challenge US influence across the region. This would be ensured indefinitely by the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan and the control of the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea by the ships of the US Fifth Fleet. Although the crippling of the al-Qaida movement, the increased influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia and the transition of Iraq to a pro-western free market economy would be hugely valuable, many people in the Bush administration saw the constraining of Iran as the real prize arising from the successful pursuit of the war on terror.

Realities

All of these outcomes were confidently expected to be well under way by the end of 2003. They would ensure US security and economic dominance in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf region. Given the increasing significance of the region’s oil reserves, and the rapidly rising oil import dependency of the United States and China, this would be a hugely welcome outcome. Above all, the idea of the New American Century that was at the heart of neoconservative thinking in the United States would have been solidified. Indeed, the threat to that idea posed by the atrocities of 9/11 would not just have been eliminated, but the very demonstration of power and determination shown by the vigorous pursuit of the global war on terror would now demonstrate American world leadership.

Six years after 9/11 and as we move into the seventh year of the war, the reality is extraordinarily different. The al-Qaida movement is much dispersed but its very dispersal makes it far more difficult to track and counter, especially as support comes from within diasporas across Europe. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri and Mullah Omar all remain at large, there have been attacks in numerous countries, including Britain, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kenya, Pakistan and Indonesia, and there has been a marked rise in anti-Americanism across the Middle East and beyond. While the great majority of Muslims deplore the violence of the movement, there is deep anger at the manner in which the United States and its dwindling coalition have fought the war. Regional satellite TV news channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya give round the clock accounts of the violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, often focusing on civilian casualties.

Full casualty figures are not known but they are likely to have exceeded 100,000 civilian deaths in Iraq alone. Moreover, many of the security functions in Iraq and Afghanistan have been privatised, with contractors able to operate with near-impunity. Well over 100,000 people have been detained, some of them for over five years and almost all of them with no recourse to any recognised judicial system. Instead, prisoner abuse, rendition and torture have become features of the western way of war.

Across southern and south-eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, there has developed a large area of territory that is now dominated by warlords, Taliban militias and the al-Qaida movement, greatly aided by the huge increase in opium cultivation and the money that this brings in from the export of heroin.

The come-back of the Taliban/al-Qaida group has been quite astonishing and provides a focus for undermining the Musharraf regime in Islamabad and threatening the stability of the Karzai government in Kabul. It even enables the al-Qaida movement to plan further actions beyond the region.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome has been the two elements of the Iraq conflict that have come to the fore in recent months. One is the manner in which Iraq has become a jihadist combat training zone in which young paramilitaries from across the region gain experience in urban warfare against well-armed and well-equipped American troops. This is altogether more relevant to the long term aims of the al-Qaida movement than the experience of an early generation of guerrillas fighting against poorly trained Soviet conscripts in 1980s Afghanistan.

The second is the manner in which regime termination and the subsequent conflict in Iraq has increased the power and influence of Iran. Regime termination in Iraq and Afghanistan may have been expected to curtail Iranian ambitions but it has had the opposite effect. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks and as war with Iraq loomed, there was a widespread view within the Bush administration that "if we get Iraq right we won't have to bother about Iran". Iraq has not been "got right" and this is at the root of the current antagonism towards Iran, an antagonism that is deepened by claims of Iranian involvement in the Iraq insurgency and by suspicions about the Iranian civil nuclear programme.

In spite of the political propaganda that has surrounded the recent "surge" in Iraq, informed military sources anticipate a US military presence in Iraq that will last at least another decade. Similarly, there is a firm anticipation that the war in Afghanistan will last at least as long. Indeed, there is a belief that there will be a US presence in both countries that will effectively be permanent. Moreover, a direct military confrontation with Iran cannot be ruled out before the 2008 Presidential Election.

Alternatives

Moving away from the current posture in the war on terror would involve radical changes. These are discussed in some detail in the new ORG International Security Report mentioned earlier and might involve, for example:

- Radically decreased military action in Afghanistan, especially in terms of the use of air power, combined with a willingness to bring some Taliban elements into the political process.
- A military withdrawal from Iraq conducted in parallel with intensive diplomatic negotiations with regional actors including Syria and Iran.
- Intense support for a just settlement of the Israel/Palestine conflict.
- Support for human rights and improvements in governance across the Middle East.
- Cessation of detentions without trial, prisoner abuse, torture and rendition.

Some aspects of these are seriously discussed in a manner that is relatively new, an example being the UK Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne, saying that negotiations with the Taliban will be necessary, but there is little or no sign of any substantive change of outlook in the United States, at least for the next fifteen months. In no small measure this is because there is still a belief that those original aims of the war on terror are essential to US security. Furthermore, they are essential to the wider aim of world leadership. Among the supporters of the idea of a New American Century, whether neoconservatives or assertive realists, even the unpopularity of the Bush administration is not enough reason to give up on this aim. To do so would, in their view, be hugely damaging to the United States. It would be a foreign policy disaster that would be greater than the withdrawal from Vietnam, and will take an even more adverse predicament than is currently faced for it to be seriously considered.

Given the problems of the Bush administration, it might be assumed that changes in policy will at least be considered. That this is unlikely to be the case owes much to the original expectations of the war on terror. It is easy to forget that prospects seemed so bright in early 2002. There seemed every likelihood

of success, with this leading to the resumption of a US global leadership that had been so shocked by 9/11. Remembering this is essential in any attempt to understand why it will be so difficult for any US administration, present or future, to move away from the current security paradigm.

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