Quandaries about Coalitions:

The U.S. Response to September 11

by Ray Takeyh **(/experts/ray-takeyh)**

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Brief Analysis

Given the scope of last week's terrorist attacks and the shadowy nature of the perpetrators, the White House has pledged that U.S. retaliation will be qualitatively different from the past -- targeting states as well as organizations, crafting a wide international coalition, employing an array of military, political, and cultural means, and persisting over a long period of time. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged that the U.S. response would be "political, economic, diplomatic, and military," while the president unequivocally declared that the objective of the United States "is to rid the world of evil." Deciding how to achieve these goals, however, raises several quandaries.

Objective: Comprehensive or Selective Strategy?

As the Bush administration charts its course, it must define its objectives carefully. A selective strategy would focus primarily on the perpetrators of the attacks; currently, the prime suspects are Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, which has provided him with sanctuary and a base of operations. Alternatively, a more comprehensive strategy would entail a broad-based antiterrorism policy that would move beyond the immediate crisis and seek to eradicate Middle Eastern terrorist cells as well as punish the states that sustain them. Although the declared goal of the administration, as enunciated by Secretary of State Colin Powell, is to "conduct a campaign against all terrorists who are conducting war against civilized people," each strategy entails different targets. In essence, a selective path focuses on the current cast of terrorists, while a comprehensive strategy concentrates on the larger menace of terrorism.

A selective strategy has the lure of simplicity, since it concentrates on an unsavory state and a fugitive terrorist. The Bush administration can easily mobilize an international coalition focused on achieving this limited, albeit difficult, task. The shortcoming of this strategy is that it inevitably dilutes the administration's "comprehensive antiterrorism" pledge and detracts from the mission of dismantling the system of terror that has long been embedded in the Middle East. The demise of bin Laden and even his Afghani patrons would still leave Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Algeria's Armed Islamic Groups, Uzbekistan's Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and a gallery of other rogues that have imperiled U.S. security and endangered American lives.

A comprehensive response would have the advantage of dealing with the totality of the problem, but it also entails potential pitfalls. Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has elucidated the dimensions of such a strategy: "It's

not . . . simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing sanctuaries, removing support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism." A strategy that calls for simultaneous military campaigns on a number of regional states risks engulfing the Middle East in a wider conflict. Such an effort is bound to be unilateral, as most of America's allies are unlikely to participate in that sort of conflict.

Although unleashing war on multiple fronts may be imprudent, an aggressive military campaign against a single state may have a salutary, deterrent impact, as other offending states will recognize the seriousness of America's intent. On the other hand, the danger of such an approach in this era of transnational terrorism is the ease with which terrorist organizations can shift their base of operations. It seems likely that the best-functioning comprehensive strategy against terrorism would be long-term and incremental. The immediate focus of such a strategy could be bin Laden, followed by a viable regime of diplomatic and economic sanctions against all offending states.

Means: Large Coalitions and Narrow Targets, or Vice Versa?

The issue of international coalition inevitably raises the question of who should be included and what role should be played by the participating states. Will the search for the widest possible coalition entail relaxing the admission standards and including unsavory regimes with a history of anti-American activism? Will the United States lead such a coalition, or will the leadership be collective?

Many of the Bush administration's Gulf War luminaries are beginning to revisit the glories of the past, when a vast international force waged war against the offending parties. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated his hope that the nascent U.S. coalition would encompass "all civilizations." A large international coalition would lend the legitimacy of world opinion to imminent U.S. military strikes. However, coalitions can also be restrictive and detract from the original mission. Although the European states have expressed their solidarity with the United States, a degree of ambivalence has already emerged from key sectors of the European Union. French premier Lionel Jospin has stressed, "our humane, political and functional solidarity with the United States does not deprive us of our sovereignty and freedom to make up our own mind." The reality remains that as a coalition becomes larger, its objectives become necessarily more limited.

The task for the Bush administration thus becomes devising a coalition that garners the benefits of world opinion without the restrictions that collective leadership imposes. Given the atrocious nature of the assault, it would behoove the administration to retain maximum initiative and consult with allies without conceding to their reservations. Such a strategy may lead to the departure of certain states from the contemplated coalition, yielding an alliance that is more united in purpose.

Coalition-building efforts should also include states that share America's antiterrorism commitments. Such a standard raises particular difficulties for the inclusion of problem states such as Iran, Syria, and Pakistan. Given Iran's profound ideological difficulties with the Taliban, Tehran may tacitly assist a coalition. However, such assistance would not lead Iran to abandon its long-held objections to the U.S. presence in the region or to the Arab-Israeli peace process. Moreover, the State Department's inclination to reach out to Iran contradicts its own designation of the Islamic Republic as "the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 2000." America's antiterrorism posture might be damaged by the inclusion of Syria, which, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, provides "safe haven and support to several terrorist organizations." And the administration's inclination to include Pakistan ignores the fact that Islamabad is directly responsible for sustaining the Taliban and nurturing bin Laden's organization.

Local Politics: Linkage with the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Whatever strategy the administration pursues, it will soon confront pressure to link the September 11 attacks to the

stalemated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. One theory is that the frustrations of the "Arab street" will manifest themselves in atrocious acts of vengeance so long as there is no progress toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is deemed by some to be the root of the attacks. The true target of Tuesday's terrorism, however, was the United States -- its citizens, values, and culture. To focus on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is to miss the fact that the perpetrators of the attacks arose from a southwest Asian subculture of jihad with the messianic mission of destroying the West. These suicidal terrorists were not registering displeasure with the pace of the negotiations or the demarcations of the Israeli state, but with an American civilization that they have long abhorred. To deflect attention from the true genesis of the attacks is to misunderstand the pernicious culture of extremism that is permeating certain theological centers of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The events of last Tuesday were transformative for the Bush administration. This new administration now has the opportunity and the obligation to chart a different course for U.S. security. The choices that they make will define not only define their own policies, but also America's international orientation.

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