Use Flexibility to Fight Terror

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

Sep 8, 2000

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At a time when U.S. global power seems absolute, the presidential candidates are assiduously avoiding thorny international security issues. Such complacency is misguided because the U.S. faces a greater terrorist threat now than at any point in the past.

The next president will have to confront not just the challenge of rogue states but also free-lance terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. There is much confusion and ambivalence in the higher echelons of government about how to address this augmented threat of terrorism. The problem is not lack of options, but the ineffectiveness of the existing options.

Libya, more than any other nation, illustrates the failure of Washington's multiplicity of approaches toward terrorism and its inability to effectively deter rogue states.

U.S. policy has oscillated between two competing models: the "Reagan model," which tried to hold nations sponsoring terrorism accountable for their conduct by using a variety of coercive tactics, including military intervention, and the policies of the Clinton administration, which views terrorism as a law enforcement issue by focusing on individuals rather than governments.

The Reagan administration's 1986 bombing of Libya in retaliation for its involvement in the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque, which killed three American servicemen, ironically testifies to the insufficiency of its model. The U.S. attack was to demonstrate resolve to Libya's Col. Moammar Gadhafi and deter him from further sponsorship of terrorism.

Yet there is strong evidence to suggest that in 1988 Libya was complicit in "the explosion of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie. Scotland, which killed 270 people, 189 of them Americans. It is apparent that Colonel Gadhafi was neither deterred nor did he abandon terrorism as an instrument of his international policy. What went wrong?

The Reagan administration was correct in its forceful response, but its inability to craft an international consensus for its 1986 airstrikes and an unwillingness to devise a more systematic military strategy limited the utility of its model. The objections by France and Germany and the circumscribed nature of the military strikes convinced Colonel Gadhafi that the United States had neither the international support nor the resolve to inflict serious damage on his regime.

The Clinton team came to power perceiving terrorism as an international legal challenge, not a national security concern. It claimed to have devised an effective response to free-lance terrorists such as bin Laden, whose

international terror network is independent of any individual state. But for this model to function properly, it requires impeccable intelligence and an ability to strike quickly and decisively.

The U.S. destruction of a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant in response to charges that bin Laden sponsored the bombing of two U.S. embassies in east Africa demonstrates the potential pitfalls of this strategy: The plant had no apparent connection to bin Laden. Moreover, the legalistic model of holding individual terrorists accountable fails when dealing with state-sponsored terrorism.

In its treatment of the Lockerbie case, the administration engaged in prolonged negotiations with the Gadhafi regime in order to secure the arrest of two relatively minor functionaries.

Paradoxically, Libyan intelligence operatives are on trial for an atrocious crime without Tripoli's assuming any responsibility. The Clinton model falters here because the United States is prosecuting those who carried out the bombing, not those who ordered it.

With the Lockerbie trial, President Clinton has bequeathed his successor a perplexing problem: Regardless of the verdict, the United States will look foolish or isolated. If there is a guilty verdict, the Europeans will consider the matter finished and continue their pursuit of lucrative commercial contracts in Libya. The United States neither will be able to re-impose the suspended sanctions nor prosecute high-ranking Libyan officials.

If there is acquittal, the U.S. policy of isolating Libya will suffer a pronounced setback and provide Colonel Gadhafi with a dramatic public relations coup.

The Reagan model of using force against a terrorist state without an international consensus is defective because it succeeds only in isolating the United States while leaving the offending regime relatively intact. The Clinton law enforcement approach is better in addressing transnational terrorists but, is plainly ineffective in dealing with state-sponsored terrorism. The proper strategy is a fusion of the two models.

The United States should hold individual states responsible for their conduct and prevent their integration into the international order. This will require considerable diplomatic skill and patient construction of international coalitions. At the same time, a rigorous law enforcement approach based on an enhanced intelligence collection capability can be effective in dealing with the new breed of terrorists that pledge allegiance to a cause rather than a state.

In effect, the United States needs a flexible anti-terrorist strategy because it confronts threats from both rogue states and rogue individuals.

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Baltimore Sun

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