Strategy and Diplomacy in Dealing with Counterterrorism

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Many, particularly in academic circles, have complained about the president’s declaration of “war” against terrorism, arguing that this is an inappropriate metaphor—particularly in the light of the clear failure of our past “wars” against poverty and drugs, wars in which we have suffered major defeats. But the metaphor of war can nevertheless be useful if we take it seriously and do what one has to do in a genuine war, i.e., formulate our priorities clearly, analyze carefully the weaknesses and strengths of our enemies, and not—in the words of Clausewitz—try to turn the war into something which it is not. With that in mind, let me put forward eight strategic and diplomatic propositions designed to help us in achieving that aim.

1. The eradication of terrorism is not amenable to military action alone, nor will the removal of Osama bin Laden solve the deeper problem that we face:
   a. The perpetrators of the first Trade Center bombing in 1993, which could have been far more destructive than it was, had nothing to do with him.
   b. Attacks on targets in Sudan and Afghanistan after the destruction of two American embassies in Africa had no discernible effect on terrorism and provoked widespread international criticism.
   c. Military action arguably will recruit new converts to the terrorist cause, who believe in “an eye for an eye.” So the way we fight this war can be far more important than our ability to put ordinance on targets.
   d. At best, military action can only be part of a much broader effort that eliminates or sufficiently modifies the environment in which the terrorist operates.

2. If you want insight into the thinking of the well-educated, fanatically dedicated, and surprisingly skillful perpetrators of the September 11 atrocities, listen carefully to what Jerry Falwell had to say about the destruction of the Trade Center:
   a. “God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve…America’s secular and anti-Christian environment left us open to our
Lord’s decision not to protect. When a nation deserts God and expels God from the culture…the result is not good.”

b. If an American like Jerry Falwell believes this—i.e., that these terrorists were instruments of God—one can well imagine how sanctified and proud of their actions as warriors of Allah they themselves and their colleagues feel.

c. The fact is that where we see liberty, prosperity, tolerance, freedom of choice, and the pursuit of happiness, they see not just license, corruption, and hard-core pornography at every video store—in short, Sodom and Gomorrah (and we know what God did to those cities)—but also a physical and cultural imperialism determined to undermine their civilization by the introduction into it of modern behavior, secular filth, and the emancipation of women.

d. It was not Osama bin Laden, after all, who first called America “the Great Satan”—it was the Ayatollah Khomeini, representing an entirely different branch of Islam and backed by scores of millions of approving Iranians, more than twenty years ago, well before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

3. The United States lacks the power and resources to win this war by itself. To be even moderately successful in the decades ahead will require the full cooperation of

I. Our allies;
II. Moderate Muslims;
III. Central Asians;
IV. Pakistan;
V. Iran;
VI. China; and especially
VII. Russia.

b. If this is to happen, the arrogant unilateralism that has characterized American diplomacy since the end of the Cold War has to come to an end.

c. The Middle East diplomacy of the Bush administration had been to look the other way until the dust settles, in short a disaster. To win the war against terrorism we must sooner or later impose an American-directed solution to the Palestinian problem, and if necessary be ready to suffer casualties as a major participant in the peacekeeping force that will be required to separate the warring parties.
d. Other nations will not fully help us in combating terrorism, no matter what pressures we apply, unless we are sensitive to their legitimate interests and are willing to reciprocate such cooperation.

e. Just several months ago the leaders of Russia and China, in the past not exactly friendly powers, had an unusually friendly meeting in which they were in full agreement in condemning the behavior of this administration. This took some doing on our part.

f. Earlier we were denied a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission, thereby demonstrating how others viewed us and displaying almost unimaginable diplomatic ineptitude.

g. Our perceived arrogance is on full exhibition when we issue an annual report in which we grade all the other countries in the world on their human rights performance. (At a university it is well understood that professors give grades and students receive them and that professors and students are hardly equal.)

h. Furthermore, our reluctance to pay our UN dues, and our eagerness to use them as bargaining chips, is widely seen as symptomatic of an American “in your face” attitude towards international institutions, obligations and opinions.

4. American defense efforts until September 11 were entirely aimed at threats from nation states, threats that are miniscule to non-existent to us for at least the next two decades. If we are “at war,” then we should make the fight against international terrorism our highest priority. This requires a restructuring of our armed forces to deal with the war that we face, not the fantasies currently on the military planning drawing boards.

a. Counter-terrorism is labor intensive. We need more and better army divisions, marines, reserves, National Guard, and intelligence assets, and less emphasis on space and missile defense, where the best solutions in any case are diplomatic, and not military.

b. Since the end of the Cold War, we have been looking for a military threat in order to justify planned defense expenditures. In wartime, we cannot afford the luxury of such wastefulness and distortion of our focus.

c. As it is, we spend as much on our defense right now as all the nations of Europe, China, Russia, and Japan put together.
5. We need a Manhattan Project to reduce and, if necessary, eventually eliminate our dependence on Middle East oil.
   a. Requisite fuel cell and battery technology already exist with the capability of replacing the internal combustion engine or dramatically reducing our reliance on it, as outlined in recent articles in *Scientific American*.
   b. We need an energy policy not formulated by the Exxon Corporation.
   c. Our best minds should be devoted to this war effort, just as they were in World War II, when we developed radar and nuclear weapons.
   d. Our historical experience suggests that if wisdom is genuinely needed, it is best to look for it someplace other than the United States government. (Viz. Robert McNamara on our involvement in the Vietnam War.)

6. Our homeland is at deep risk from nuclear terrorism. Nothing is more important to American security than the struggle against nuclear proliferation.
   a. The most important danger from terrorism is nuclear. This does not obviate the risks from chemical or bacteriological attack, but those Weapons of Mass Destruction probably require at least the cooperation of a nation state willing to devote great resources to their development and delivery, a nation state that presumably would understand what the American reaction would be to such an attack. Aum Shinrikyo in Tokyo did great damage, but not mass damage.
   b. The nuclear risk we face includes the sailing of a merchant ship with a nuclear weapon aboard into New York harbor and having a suicide bomber detonate it.
   c. It also includes a terrorist attack on one or, if past experience with Osama bin Laden at the trade towers and in our African embassies is any guide, several of our nuclear reactors simultaneously—thereby causing an American Chernobyl.
   d. Equally worrisome would be an attack against one or several of our many nuclear waste storage facilities, where the release of radioactive gas could cause a catastrophe.
   e. While the construction of a nuclear weapon from scratch is probably beyond the capability of any terrorist group, the purchase of such a weapon is not, nor can we ignore the
capacity of terrorists to produce “radiological” weapons—i.e., nuclear materials encasing conventional explosives.

f. Instead of giving perfunctory lip service to non-proliferation, we should make it a genuine top priority, including expressing willingness on our part:
   1. To destroy the nuclear arsenals of rogue states, as the Israelis did to Iraq in 1981, and
   2. To reduce our nuclear arsenal to a handful of weapons if others would do the same.

g. This would require careful, painstaking, and skilled diplomacy on our part, but it is achievable.

h. We have no use for nuclear weapons now that there is no longer another superpower to deter. Such weapons are weapons of the weak, not the strong. We don’t need them because we have other weapons, such as fuel-air explosives, to replace them. But they would be priceless assets for terrorists out to destroy our society.

7. If we are to be successful, international law must be seen as the basis of our leadership in the struggle against terrorism. Our own domestic security therefore requires that we not be cavalier about treaty and other international obligations.
   a. This administration, at the urging of our weapons laboratories, was about to follow the lead of the French and go ahead with nuclear testing, in violation of the spirit of the Test Ban Treaty. It was just waiting for the right timing. It should now be clear that to do so at any point in the foreseeable future would be an egregious error threatening our own homeland security.
   b. We should reconsider our stated intention of unilaterally abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.
   c. The UN is crucial to our efforts to fight terrorism. Other states will go along with UN-dictated action, whereas they will be reluctant to adhere to terms seen as dictated by the United States.
   d. We should therefore evince an attitude of respect to all international obligations and in future, at the very least, pay our UN dues promptly and willingly.

8. We should create a genuine strategic partnership with both Russia and China. Barring an enormous diplomatic failure, neither of these giant countries should ever have reason to be enemies of the United States.
a. This was in fact our stated intention with first Gorbachev and then Yeltsin at the end of the Cold War. We did not do so because we had other priorities that conflicted with such a goal and we perceived Russia as a failed state, with ineffective armed forces and a corrupt society that we could alienate without suffering any important consequences.

b. In our quest for a plausible future military enemy, we have been on a collision course with the Chinese, as demonstrated by declarations of our readiness to defend Taiwan and continuing spy flights targeted against them even after the unfortunate collision with one of their planes earlier this year.

c. In the current circumstances Russia is crucial to us because of its:

Geography; Natural Resources; Intelligence capabilities; Military power; Influence in Central Asia; Experience in and knowledge of Afghanistan; Nuclear arsenal of thousands of weapons; and Skills as a producer of other Weapons of Mass Destruction.

d. Keeping this in mind, we should rethink our treatment of Central Asia, Chechnya, NATO enlargement, and Missile Defense, taking Russian sensitivities into account, with the stated aim of transforming our relationship into a genuine strategic partnership.

e. In the Second World War, after all, we did not hesitate to form a close alliance with Stalin, one of the great mass murderers of the twentieth century and the aggressor and conqueror of Eastern Poland, Bessarabia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Southern Finland.

f. China, with more than a billion people, a $100 billion two-way trade with the United States, a Muslim separatist problem in Sinkiang, and borders with Central Asia, is obviously crucial to us as well. Whatever our personal sympathies with separatists in Taiwan and Tibet, we should eschew provocations and be scrupulous in our legal adherence to the “One China” policy that we have been sensibly following since the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972.

In sum, if we are at war then it behooves us to think strategically about our war aims and to order our priorities, including the formulation of a realistic assessment of the capabilities of our enemies. This requires at the very least that we put aside our past arrogance as the sole superpower and “victor” in
the Cold War, abandon our misguided unilateralism, and start dealing with the world in line with the reality that:

1. We desperately need help from others in our “war” against terrorism; and
2. Our citizens and our homeland face a genuine threat of millions of deaths and billions in property losses—a threat unprecedented in our history.