

The Pros and Cons of a Hard-line Policy

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[Note: what follows is the outline used for my talk at the teach-in at the University of Virginia, October 4, 2001.]

The subject of my talk is the pros and cons of taking a hard-line policy to combat terrorism, specifically the Al Qaeda network headed by Osama Bin Laden.

Much of the debate over the past three weeks has centered on this question, with two main positions evident:

pro-hard-liners: we need to show the terrorists we mean business, we must have some justice, and only a hard-line policy will help reduce the chance of another major attack against western civilization.

pro-soft-liners: to use military force against the terrorists would only prove their point -- that the U.S. is a violent and immoral society -- and thus draw more individuals into the terrorists ranks. Besides, we're unlikely to get the terrorists anyway, and if we resort to wholesale bombings in Afghanistan and elsewhere, we'll only kill innocent civilians. This is not only immoral, but would further alienate the US from the Arab world.

I would like to draw upon int'l relations theory to see if it has anything of value to add to the discussions.

I should note that most of the theories of IR are designed for state-to-state relations, so there's the question of whether they apply to actors like terrorists groups, that are neither unitary states with resources we can easily target, nor are they perhaps fully rational. I'll address this issue later.

Let me start with a key distinction IR theorists make between the spiral model (SM) and the deterrence model (DM):

SM: argues that the adversary is likely acting out of insecurity, and is merely afraid of us.

yet by our past hard-line policies, we have created an environment of mistrust

-thus the other takes violent actions against us out of fear, rather than from desires to destroy us.

-the best action, therefore, is to take a soft-line policy, trying to reassure the other that you mean no harm. This should help despiral the conflict

-many use this model, for example, to explain why the cold war with Russia went on so long, and why it ended. Both sides were frightened of the other, and once more reassuring policies were introduced, the conflict ended.

DM takes a very different view:

argues that the adversary is driven by aggressive non-security motives, and that it basically wants to eliminate us or to destroy our way of life

-here, the only option is to try to deter the other from taking violent actions.

-this requires two things: power and resolve. You need the power to be able to convince the other that you can impose high costs on him if he gets out of line.

you need resolve, in order to ensure that he believes that you will indeed use your power when push comes to shove. Obviously, credibility is very important here. You need to have a reputation for using force when it's necessary. Otherwise, your threats are not credible, and regardless of your power, the adversary will believe you don't have the guts to use it.

for followers of this view, the cold war was the result of Soviet aggression -
- Moscow's attempt to spread its evil philosophy around the globe. Only once the U.S. started to deter the SU by the policy of containment did the Soviets moderate their policies.

In sum, can see that from the SM perspective, soft-line policies are needed to reassure a frightened adversary and avoid making both him and others more afraid of you.

DM has the exact opposite prescription: one always need to show the iron fist, since if you back away from conflict, the adversary will see you as weak in resolve, and perhaps also power. "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile" is the motto.

what might these models teach us about the current situation?

the core element dividing the two arguments is the assessment of the other actor's intentions.

SM: assumes that the other is only insecure, and therefore needs to be reassured of our good intentions.

DM: assumes that the other is implacably hostile and aggressive, always looking for ways to undermine and destroy us. It thus needs to be taught that we can't be pushed around.

In the cold war, I think a good case can be made for the SM -- that the Soviets were largely acting out of fear, and therefore reassurance was the best policy.

In the current situation, however, I think the DM is more appropriate.

We are dealing with two adversaries -- the terrorist networks, and the states that are providing safe haven to their activities.

both of these groups, but particularly the terrorists themselves, are committed to the destruction of the western way of life, and what they see as the insidious spread of western values around the globe, via the vehicle of globalization and capitalism.

From my point of view, this is not a clash of civilizations -- Arab versus European -- nor is it a clash of religions -- Christian vs. Islam.

rather, it is clash of modernity vs. traditionalism.

-science, liberal democracy, liberal individualism, global capitalism: from the point of view of the fundamentalist leaders of the terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, these things are seen as destructive of traditional Islamic values.

-the strong presence of the US in the Gulf region since the Gulf War, and close U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia, only reinforce what is seen as a fundamental threat to the traditional way of life

diplomacy, negotiation, conciliation -- these tools cannot work against such an enemy. As Tony Blair noted recently, we cannot sit down with the leaders of Al Qaeda and have a meeting of minds.

this does not mean, as I'll get into in a moment, that our policy should be solely hard-line. But military force and forceful actions against terrorist networks must be used as the primary tool to both reduce the strength of the networks and to send a message to the leaders that might help deter future attacks.

There is one important assumption of the DM that critics may say does not hold in this case: namely, that the other is a rational actor capable of calculating the costs and benefits of action.

when we see individuals kill themselves in the name of their movement, as we saw on Sept. 11, then it may be tempting to believe we are dealing with an inherently irrational force.

But we must, in good Clausewitzian fashion, make a distinction between those who carry out the instructions of the leaders, and the leaders themselves.

in any war, we ask individuals to die for a cause. In World War I, for example, men knew they would die as they climbed out of the trenches. Japanese kamikaze pilots certainly knew this when they slammed their planes into American ships during World War II.

But terrorist leaders today, just like leaders during the world wars, are using suicidal tactics as parts of a rational grand strategy to achieve their political ends.

And the key is: THEY do not want to die in the process! They are rational enough to know that, even if they are mentally up to the task of self-sacrifice, their organizations and thus the cause would die if the leaders and the headquarters were to be wiped out.

This is even more true for the leaders of the countries that harbor the terrorist groups.

When the Reagan administration attacked Libya in 1986 to send a message to Quaddafi about promoting terrorism, I was at the time against such actions, seeing them as counterproductive and immoral.

-but I believe the evidence shows that Quaddafi has been far less active in the terrorist game since that time. In short, he knows the consequences to him personally, and to his regime, of supporting terrorism.

Likewise, hard-line actions today can indeed send a message not only to the Taliban, not only to Osa Bin Laden, but to other government suspected of funding or harboring terrorism, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and North Korea.

Nonetheless, I also believe that simultaneously, we have to do more to improve the image of the US and to undercut the arguments used by the terrorist leaders in their recruitment and funding efforts.

above and beyond all else, we need to overcome the US image as a selfish power

-selfish in every sense of the word

1. the US is near the bottom of all industrialized countries in terms of the amount of foreign aid it gives relative to its GNP.

-what is needed is the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for the southern hemisphere, and particularly the Middle East.

the Senate is already discussing a foreign aid package for Afghanistan to help rebuild the country following the impending military action. But more than that is needed to convince the people of the region that globalization doesn't just benefit the wealthy in their own societies and the people of US and Western Europe.

-since Americans hate to pay taxes, I realize this is a tall order. But with the reality of Sept 11 now fresh in our minds, perhaps enlightened self-interest can prevail.

2. The US must also move away from its tendency towards unilateralism. The "my way or the highway" attitude of the Bush administration, as shown on things like the Kyoto treaty and National Missile Defense, must be moderated, and apparently is being moderated.

3. The US must also ease the economic sanctions against Iraq that are causing such hardship, and only fueling the propoganda campaigns of the terrorist groups.

-if innocent civilians -- mostly children -- die in the hundreds of thousands in Iraq in a failed policy, then it is hard to sustain the moral highground in the eyes of the Islamic world.

4. Helping to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict soon, using all the economic

and political leverage possible, is critical. Every time Palestinians are killed by Israeli forces, regardless of who is at fault, the terrorist groups will have an easier time drawing more people and money in.

-Israel is still the largest recipient of US aid -- approximately 20% of our total aid budget at last count -- and we need to use the threat of a cut off to moderate Israel's policies

-simultaneously, we need to extend promises of much greater aid to the Palestinians. Until their economy gets on its feet, poverty and resentment will only increase the likelihood of a continued spiral of violence.

5. Finally, any military attacks against Osa bin Laden and the Taliban must be measured, precise, and with clearly stated limits on their extent and duration. And they must be backed by the largest coalition possible, esp. one that includes the neighboring states in the region.

-here I think the Bush administration and in particular Colin Powell are doing a pretty good job, and need to keep it up.

So let me conclude:

While in many situations, spiral model prescriptions are appropriate, this is not one of those situations.

-even if we could sit down with terrorist leaders, no amount of talk with them will ever convince them to give up what they see to be a moral and holy struggle against the global spread of our way of life.

Yet the leaders of this struggle are also rational calculators of the best means to their ends.

-and given their lack of power, terrorist tactics are their best means.

So unfortunately, we are faced with a lesser of two evils choice. Hard-line action must be a critical element of the US response. Only in this way can we both deter future attacks and reduce the ability of the terrorist organizations to launch them.

On the other hand, the US must also do more to minimize the number of people in the Middle East and elsewhere that see it as a selfish neoimperialist power committed only to selfish materialism.

much greater foreign aid, less unilateralism, and the ending of sanctions that hurt only the poor in places like Iraq, must accompany the use of military force, if we are to undermine the appeal of fundamentalist organizations.

As I see it, only a combination of hard-line and soft-line policies will achieve the ends we seek.

Thank you very much.

Select Readings

Yossef Bodansky, Bin Laden: The Man who Declared War on the United States (Prima Press, 2001).

Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton University Press), esp. chap. 3.

Ahmed Rashid, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia (Yale University Press, 2001).