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The aftermath of 11 September

Calibrating the response

Following the devastating 11 September terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, the US and key allies are focused on how to combat *al-Qaeda*, the network allegedly responsible for the atrocities, and similar organisations. In the first week of October, major forces were being deployed by the US in and around the Middle East, while US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld toured the Gulf region to build political support. NATO officials accepted the validity of what is claimed to be evidence of *al-Qaeda*'s culpability. Statements by various world leaders raised expectations of an imminent strike against Afghanistan, where the ruling *Taliban* is sheltering the head of *al-Qaeda*, Osama bin Laden.

The September attacks do not necessarily presage worse to come. Terrorists have tried to carry out a massive attack against a Western target since the early 1990s, and it took them nearly a decade finally to succeed. September's attacks took months to plan and exceptional discipline to execute. Tightened security means that the tactic of hijacking and crashing aircraft into buildings will now be harder to use. Future attacks involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are clearly a risk, but require a degree of scientific expertise that *al-Qaeda* and other organisations have not yet demonstrated. Nonetheless, the attacks have shattered any sense of complacency. Their immediate effects – causing huge loss of life and pushing the global economy closer towards recession – are profound enough. But they have also fuelled concerns about a conflict between Islamic fundamentalists and Westerners that could make other security challenges – in the Persian Gulf, East Asia and the Balkans – seem comparatively straightforward. Countering terrorism is being accorded the highest priority by the US and its allies, but the precise contours of this campaign are still being sketched out.

Striking at *al-Qaeda*

There are powerful arguments for military action against Osama bin Laden and *al-Qaeda*. The direct and circumstantial links between many of the 11 September attackers and *al-Qaeda* are myriad. Bin Laden's invective against the West and his predictions of terror attacks that did occur are well documented. He leads the world's largest, best-resourced and most extreme terrorist movement. He appears far less prone to persuasion or reason than even the most radical of today's state leaders. Above all, there is the risk that he will strike again. Those arguing for military restraint often forget that it was tried throughout the 1990s, when the US responded to terrorism with criminal investigations and limited cruise missile strikes. Such restrained responses to the 1993 World Trade Center bombings, the 1995 attempt to blow up 11 jumbo jets over the Pacific, the 1998 US embassy bombings in East Africa, and numerous attacks on US forces in the Persian Gulf, did not elicit restraint in kind from terrorists.

Nonetheless, if used, military force would have to be employed extremely carefully. It will be most effective if aimed at preventing terrorism, rather than exacting revenge. Prevention requires that those involved in the attacks are brought to justice, but it does not demand the systematic destruction of what remains of Afghanistan's infrastructure or otherwise retaliating aimlessly. These principles quickly rule out certain military options. A Kosovo-style strategic air war against Afghanistan, undertaken to coerce the *Taliban* to extradite bin Laden, would probably cause more civilian harm than military benefit. While focused strikes against *Taliban* military assets make military sense, applying widespread pressure against the remnants of the Afghan economy and society do not; starvation among innocent Afghanis being more likely to result than *Taliban* capitulation. Nor does a *Desert Storm*-style ground war hold military appeal. First, there is no place from which to stage such a campaign, given the refusal of Pakistan – the only country now recognising the *Taliban* government – to allow its territory to be used for such purposes. The US could not sustain more than a few tens of thousands of soldiers in Afghanistan without access to ports and staging areas. Second, even if Pakistan could be persuaded to change its mind, bin Laden might escape before outside forces could reach him. Finally, invasion would be a daunting proposition in a country full of land mines, small arms, foreboding terrain and experts at ambush and mountain warfare.

Military operations in and around Afghanistan would have to be focused precisely – as Washington and its allies now seem to intend. Commando units – already rumoured to be in Afghanistan – could at least be stationed in the area to be ready to seize bin Laden and top aides, if and when the opportunity arises. Intelligence links with Pakistan and others will have to be strengthened, since it is they who are most likely to learn of bin Laden's whereabouts. The Afghan resistance – which, if it is to attract greater support among Afghanis and in Pakistan needs to be broadened beyond the Northern Alliance to include Pashtun tribes – could be trained and provided with better equipment so that it can pressure or if necessary overthrow the *Taliban*. Washington has already approved funding to aid opponents of the *Taliban*. Western airpower could be deployed to support resistance. Finally, there might be a limited role for US and other western ground forces in helping to deliver a *coup de grace* against the *Taliban* in conjunction with a strengthened resistance. However, this prospect remains many months away at best.

Caution must be exercised over other military options that the Bush administration still seems to be contemplating. First, Rumsfeld's suggestion of possible strikes against the military and strategic assets of other countries thought to harbour terrorists is risky and unwise. While localised strikes against terrorists may be feasible, broader campaigns against Syria, Iran or other countries would obviously cost their cooperation in the fight against *al-Qaeda* and raise concern among allies that the US has lost its

cool. Second, any attacks against Iraq would need to be well justified. Hawkish elements within the Bush administration argue that Saddam could provide *al-Qaeda* with chemical or biological weapons if he felt safe from reprisal. However, there is little reason to think that Saddam has risked suicide with such direct and escalatory support for *al-Qaeda*. If he has in fact done so, Washington may conclude that he must be unseated as a preventative measure, necessitating a second *Desert Storm* – albeit with higher casualties likely this time in a march on Baghdad. Such action could not be undertaken without strong evidence that Saddam's support for bin Laden has been real and important.

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An outpost of the anti-*Taliban* Northern Alliance in typical Afghan terrain.

Traditional military agenda

Against this backdrop, the US quadrennial defence review (QDR), scheduled to be released this month, now seems of secondary importance. Even before the 11 September attacks, Rumsfeld had indicated that the QDR would avoid many tough budgetary decisions, especially regarding purchases of new weapon systems. He had also retreated from mandating modest cuts in the US armed forces. Nevertheless, the QDR provides a reminder that, in meeting new challenges, resource allocation issues need to be addressed.

Several observations concerning the QDR are warranted. First, the basic case for some form of national missile defence system has not been weakened by the terrorist attacks, which demonstrated that the US has resourceful enemies with a wanton disregard for human life. However, Rumsfeld's preoccupation with the long-range ballistic missile threat, and his apparent desire for a large-scale defence system, appears less justified in light of the evidence of other threats requiring urgent attention. September's events strengthen the argument for a missile defence system that does not deprive the US government of resources for dealing with other homeland security problems. They also suggest that the US requires a system designed to reassure Russia and China, so that they continue to cooperate on counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation issues.

Second, combating terrorism is an additional task of the US national security establishment, rather than a substitute for the traditional concern of being ready to fight hostile states if necessary. There are circumstances – unlikely, but nonetheless plausible – under which the present crisis could produce another war against Iraq. The crisis has given China and the US a sense of common cause that reduces the immediate odds of military conflict between them – even North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has expressed condolences to the US. However, the security problems of East Asia – as of other parts of the world – are primarily indigenous. Neither sympathy for Americans nor a sense of common cause on a given issue will make US allies of Beijing and Pyongyang. Generally, the short-term chances of war against Iraq have probably risen, and those against China and North Korea have possibly declined for the time being. As a result, some type of two-front military capability seems necessary for the US – even if it is still reasonable to explore alternative concepts to the two-*Desert Storm* formula which has dominated US planning for nearly a decade. Similarly, a vigorous weapons procurement programme is still needed, given the amount of ageing weaponry in US inventories – although the services' ambitious demands for a wide range of expensive next-generation fighter jets, helicopters, ships and land vehicles will have to be reined in. Annual US national security spending will increase in future, but it still seems unlikely to rise by the nearly $50 billion needed to satisfy existing Pentagon appetites. Rumsfeld's review seems to have avoided many of the tough choices this implies.

Homeland security

The phenomenon of 'apocalyptic terrorism' cannot be fully eliminated through military and covert action. It appears unlikely that the US and its allies will be able to shut down *al-Qaeda* and other organisations such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad or Algerian groups. Even assuming effective military action, better sharing of intelligence and immigration information, strict global controls on the finances of *al-Qaeda* and the emergence of a less hostile regime in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to assume that future attacks will be attempted. It is impossible to counter all threats, but systematic preparations are needed against as many plausible mass-casualty attacks as can be imagined. These range from air- and shipborne explosives and chemical and biological agents delivered against congested areas in cities, to strategically placed car bombs.

As director of the US Office of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge will have to marshal resources against a wide range of threats. Beyond airline and airport security, his mandate will have to include devising more systematic monitoring of container ships entering the US; better information sharing on the movements of individuals between immigration, customs, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as sister agencies in other countries; encouraging builders and owners of large structures to protect their air circulation systems against the introduction of illicit substances; stockpiling vaccines and antibiotics against plausible biological threats; and developing better antidotes and stronger public health infrastructure to detect and track the outbreak of infectious diseases. Further efforts to secure Russia's WMD arsenal and convert its weapons economy are also justified to prevent proliferation. Preliminary estimates suggest that such an agenda could easily cost $5bn a year in the US – without even counting the costs of added airline security. Other expenditures will become necessary as more vulnerabilities are detected. US statements about the need for a long, sustained 'war on terrorism' do not reflect a tactical preference but a practical reality.