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A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF US-EUROPEAN COOPERATION ON COUNTERTERRORISM

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The Transatlantic alliance which played a key roll in preserving European security in the Cold War has become far more than an alliance in the traditional sense: it has become, to borrow Karl Deutsch's term, a genuine collective security community, and continues to provide the most capable and effective framework for joint action to deal with the transnational security challenges that confront us in the 21st century. Prior to 9/11 very few security analysts would have included international terrorism as a major challenge to international security. It was seen as a form of low intensity conflict largely of interest to national governments and local or regional law enforcement agencies in countries affected. Europeans in the 1990s were primarily concerned with the crises in the former Jugoslavia. Americans were primarily preoccupied with efforts to prevent the proliferation of wmd and their possible acquisition by rogue states.

The 9/11 attacks changed all that. Hijacked airliners were seized by suicide terrorists and deliberately flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing almost 3,000 people. These attacks were carried out by Al Qaeda operatives in pursuit of their declared aims to terrorise Americans and to inflict major damage and disruption on iconic symbols of American economic and military power. It was the most lethal assault by a non-state organisation in the history of terrorism. When President George W. Bush took office he and his advisors created the impression that the new administration would be placing its main emphasis on domestic issues, reducing foreign entanglements, and avoiding new ones. This 'Fortress America' approach has been completely reversed since 9/11. The US government embarked on a policy of global activism and military intervention unparalleled since the days of the Cold War. Initially US policy continued to maintain a strong push for multilateral cooperation against terrorism. A Coalition against Terrorism was formed. Remarkably, even the Russian and Chinese governments, traditionally deeply opposed to US global activism, stepped forward to join the Coalition and President Putin gave permission to the US to over-fly and use bases within Russia's sphere of influence. It was clear that the leaders in Moscow and Beijing saw the activities of the Al Qaeda network as a grave threat to their own national security in Muslim regions where there was already insurgency by separatist groups.

How did the European Union states respond? There was huge public sympathy and support for the US. As <u>Le Monde</u> put it in a famous phrase, 'We are all Americans'. The European member states of NATO unanimously invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, offering immediate assistance to their American allies. There is ample evidence that the political leaders and elites of all the EU member states share the same overall threat assessment of the Al Qaeda network as that which is held by US counterterrorism policymakers. They all accept that Al Qaeda's network is by far the most dangerous terrorist movement facing the international community. This is because Al Qaeda is fanatically committed to carrying out terrorist attacks causing mass fatalities; has a presence in up to 90 countries thus providing it with 'global reach'; and has shown its ability to adapt and survive in the face of serious setbacks such as the loss of its training

bases in Afghanistan after the toppling of the Taliban regime; and continues to recruit and indoctrinate new generations of suicide bombers, including within Muslim communities in the homelands of western states. It is also widely understood in Europe, especially in the wake of the Madrid and London bombings, that it is extremely difficult to counter this form of terrorism in open societies. Last but not least, CT agencies in Europe are fully aware that the Al Qaeda network and its affiliates are eagerly seeking to acquire the materials and expertise to create unconventional weapons capable of causing mass casualties and destruction.

So, if there are similar threat assessments on both sides of the Atlantic, why have there been major differences and damaging setbacks in transatlantic CT cooperation? How can they be overcome?

Diverging Strategies

The central problem in transatlantic CT cooperation has been that the governments of the European Union member states and the government of the United States have had major differences over the choice of strategy to defeat, or at least to seriously reduce the terrorism threat. President Bush declared a 'war on terrorism' after 9/11, and this seemed very appropriate to Americans because bin Laden and his followers had called for a 'global jihad' against the US and its allies in their notorious 'Fatwa' of 23rd February 1998. Many made comparisons between 9/11 and the Pearl Harbour attack. The sheer scale of the 9/11 attacks made the use of the term 'war' seem appropriate. Yet while it is true that Al Qaeda uses the language of war this is all too common in modern terrorist terminology. Most of them like to think of themselves as 'warriors' for some cause or other. It is a kind of secret 'dirty' warfare perhaps but it is not war of the kind that states generally have been waging with each other. Moreover the 'war' label enables the terrorists to present themselves as legitimate combatants in the eyes of the world. And when President Bush said he was declaring war on terrorists it misled many into assuming that the US military would be able to 'solve' the terrorist problem by defeating Al Qaeda on battlefields in the Middle East and that with their superior military force the terrorists would be rapidly defeated. This is of course a grossly misleading picture of the nature of the struggle against terrorists, a struggle which needs to be multi-pronged as well as multilateral.

Europeans have in my view, largely eschewed the phrase 'war on terrorism' and have stressed a holistic approach to the struggle, giving a much greater role to the criminal justice system – i.e. pursuing terrorists, bring them to trial and convicting them.

As I have argued at length elsewhere, there are great dangers and problems inherent in the idea of reliance on the war model in a democratic response to terrorism.[1] The value of strong well-trained counter-terrorist military units as one element in a multi-pronged strategy to tackle major terrorist threats has been amply demonstrated in the history of democratic responses to terrorism, but over-reliance on a military response shows a fundamental misunderstanding of terrorism as a mode of conflict and the modus operandi of terrorist operatives, such as those in the Al Qaeda network, who can hide in the urban jungles of cities around the world, blending into their surroundings and

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[1] See Paul Wilkinson, Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, Chapter 6.

secretly recruiting and indoctrinating new generations of suicide bombers capable of carrying out no-warning coordinated attacks on a whole range of civilian and infrastructure targets.

If the experience of the Israelis in their struggles with Hezbollah and Hamas and the US and the UK in their efforts to impose security in Iraq can teach us anything it is surely, (i) that there is no purely military 'solution' to a serious and sophisticated terrorist campaign, and (ii) that over-dependence on the military in efforts to suppress terrorism often prove dangerously counter-productive providing the terrorists with a powerful propaganda and recruitment weapon as well as a cornucopia of highly visible fresh targets.

The 'War on Terrorism' and the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq

The decision by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to invade Iraq created a serious split in the North Atlantic Alliance. It was a unilateral decision by the Bush administration, acting at behest of a small but influential group of neoconservatives, with Prime Minister Blair riding pillion, taking Britain into the Iraq War without the endorsement of the UN Security Council and almost certainly against the wishes of a majority in the Labour Party. This decision undermined the multilateralism which had been so clearly demonstrated by NATO and the EU in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Hence, although intelligence and police CT cooperation between the US and the major European countries opposed to the invasion of Iraq continued, the opportunity to develop a genuinely multilateral strategy against Al Qaeda fully involving all the major European allies was lost.

European opponents of the Iraq war could not understand why the Bush administration had chosen to attack Iraq when it was quite clear that Saddam Hussein had not been involved in planning or carrying out the 9/11 attacks and there was no evidence that he was in league with bin Laden's Al Qaeda. The claims by the US and the UK governments that Saddam's regime had weapons of mass destruction which were threatening western security were soon shown to be bogus. (In reality Saddam's Iraq was the most contained country in the Middle East, subject to economic sanction and with 'no-fly zones' enforced by allied aircraft).

Another major consequence of the Iraq invasion and occupation was that it deflected huge military resources away from Afghanistan, where the Taliban (with Al Qaeda under its wing) was making an increasingly determined effort to regain control of large tracts of Afghan territory and President Karzai's democratically elected government was in desperate need of the security assistance which was vital if reconstruction of the country's shattered economy was to move ahead.

Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the unilateral decision by Bush and Blair to invade Iraq not only undermined the chance of an agreed multilateral global strategy to deal with the challenge of Al Qaeda: it also proved to be a huge strategic blunder which has cost thousands of lives of coalition and Iraqi soldiers, police and civilians, cost at least 3 trillion dollars[2] to the US alone, and damaged the international standing of the US and the UK in the Middle East and beyond.

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[2] See Jospeh Stilglitz & Linda J. Bilmes (co-authors), The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict, WW Norton, New York, March 2008.

The Importance of Restoring the Atlantic Allies' Reputation for Upholding the Rule of Law and Human Rights

I grew up during the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War and like most of my generation I saw the United States as a champion of democracy and the rule of law. Sadly for many Europeans and Americans and for the wider world the US reputation as the world's greatest democracy has been tarnished by some of the Bush administration's responses to terrorism.

Europeans find it hard to understand why the US government decided to try to circumvent the Federal criminal justice system[3] by incarcerating terrorist suspects in Guantanamo and refusing them access to the US courts. There is plenty of evidence that US courts had previously dealt very fairly but firmly with those accused of serious crimes of terrorism. Due to recent US court judgements the legality of the whole Guantanamo project and the 'military tribunals' supposed to try terrorist suspects has been called into question.

Even more egregious has been the way in which the Bush administration has allowed the torture of terrorist suspects. Most international law experts agree that water-boarding is a form of torture. It is shocking to learn that it has been countenanced by the US government.

The Transatlantic alliance cannot hope to win the battle of ideas against the Al Qaeda network of it shows by its actions that it ignores its own oft-proclaimed human rights principles. Living up to the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights should be recognised as an <u>indispensable </u>element in any long-term winning strategy to prevail over the extremist ideologies that fuel terrorism.[4]

Conclusion

It is to be devoutly hoped, for the good of the US and the whole North Atlantic Alliance that with the end of the Bush and Blair administrations we will see an end to unilateralism.

I do not believe that it would be in the national interests of either the US or European nations to pursue further projects of 'regime change' and imposing democracy through military intervention in 'pre-emptive' wars. Indeed, in my view, such policies would only endanger international peace and security, seriously damage the Atlantic alliance and further weaken the UN. Moreover, such policies would only serve to boost international terrorism and launch more terror wars from which the interveners would find no easy exit. The coalition needs to find a responsible and properly phased withdrawal from Iraq. We do not need any more damaging ventures of this kind.

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[3] See Wilkinson, op. cit, Chapter 5, for an assessment of the value of the criminal justice model in the democratic response to terrorism.
[4] See Magnus Ranstorp and Paul Wilkinson (Eds), Terrorism and Human Rights, London and New York, Routledge, 2007.