

A Global Response to Terrorism

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The reflections offered below concern the geo-strategic context within which the United States (“U.S.”) should think about national security in the coming decades. My central contention is that, in order to be effective, U.S. counterterrorism policy must be part of a coordinated, global response, involving building and sustaining international institutions and regional alliances to contain terrorist threats. Strong international relationships are essential both for practical reasons and for reclaiming the United States’ legitimacy on the world stage.

A major problem confronting the U.S. in Iraq is the perception based on past U.S.-led missions, namely the Vietnam War, that we lack the will to stay the course. If enough people believe that it is only a matter of time before U.S. troops pack up and leave, even if the job remains unfinished, there is a knock-on effect, influencing current U.S. efforts. Consequently, insurgents have every incentive to wait us out abroad, while at home, the scores of American fatalities and severely wounded each month seem all the more tragically pointless.

Some argue that if the U.S. can stabilize the situation, it will then become possible to leave. They point to “the surge” in this regard. The decline in fatalities since late 2007 might partly be due to the surge, but, to the extent that it is, this increases Iraqi reliance on U.S. forces. This difficulty was most starkly apparent in early April of 2008, when over a thousand Iraqi forces refused to fight or abandoned their posts in an assault on Shiite militias in Basra, forcing the British and Americans to take up the slack.¹ The Bush Administration’s policy that “as the Iraqis stand up we will stand down”² exhibits the logic of a parent telling a teenager that he will stop getting an allowance once he starts earning an income. It is a recipe for fostering dependence rather than weaning.

This difficulty is compounded by our need to depend on allies, whose own politics might make them just as fickle as we are. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for example, is widely known to be cooler than Tony Blair to his country’s involvement in Iraq. Even as Downing Street was denying that Brown’s July 2007 visit to Camp David involved unveiling plans for a British withdrawal, *The Times* of London reported that one of Brown’s aides was sounding out Washington “on the possibility of an early British military withdrawal” from Basra, which has since taken place.³ If your adversary believes you are going to fold, why wouldn’t they up the ante?

A possible response to this worry is to scotch the perception of inevitable defeat. No doubt this is what prompted Undersecretary of Defense Eric Edelman’s criticism

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¹ Stephen Farrell & James Glanz, *More Than 1,000 in Iraq’s Forces Quit Basra Fight*, N.Y. TIMES, April 4, 2008, at A1.

² John D. Banusiewicz, *‘As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down’ Bush Tells Nation*, AMERICAN FORCES PRESS SERVICE, June 28, 2005, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=16277>.

³ Sarah Baxter & David Cracknell, *U.S. fears that Brown wants Iraq pull-out*, TIMES (London), July 29, 2007, at 1.

of Senator Clinton last year. Responding to her request for a Pentagon plan for U.S. departure, Edelman wrote that “premature and public discussion of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies in Iraq, much as we are perceived to have done in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia.”⁴ Suggesting that a senator who raises questions about the Administration’s Iraq policy is somehow unpatriotic or giving aid and comfort to the enemy smacks of McCarthyism. Edelman’s letter to Clinton was, consequently, a political gift: Clinton could both take the moral high ground and further distance herself from her earlier support for the war. Edelman’s response also reflected his slim grasp of the problem’s roots. Our leaders’ commitments to Iraq will eventually flag *not* because the other side perceives we are planning a withdrawal, but rather because we did not go to war in Iraq to protect *vital* U.S. interests.

Six decades ago George Kennan, Director of Policy Planning in the Truman Administration, pointed out that going to war when a vital American interest is not threatened is problematic because our adversaries *will have* vital interests at stake. Opponents will, therefore, have every incentive to wait us out, confident that the dynamic that Edelman wanted to avoid will eventually kick in. This is precisely why Kennan opposed America’s involvement in Vietnam, which unfolded as he predicted, and why, in 2002 at the age of 98, he also spoke out against the planned Iraq invasion.⁵

President Bush’s attempts to deploy the Vietnam analogy have, predictably, backfired.⁶ The revisionist historians, to whom the President appealed, claim—as General Westmoreland and others did at the time of the Vietnam War—that the war was winnable, and that greater suffering would have been averted had we stayed in Vietnam. Although these claims are controversial and have been widely challenged, the salient point to note here is that they could be granted without laying a glove on Kennan’s argument, which does not depend on claims about whether the U.S. might, in principle, be able to prevail at some point in a given conflict. Rather, Kennan’s theory depends on the claim that the window of opportunity, which depends critically on public support, is likely to close before we prevail. In other words, if the U.S. goes to war when its vital interests are not at stake, it will not be able to stay the course because the general public—both domestically and internationally—will not stand for it.

Kennan was the architect of the doctrine of containment, developed at the start of the Cold War in response to the Soviet threat. He believed the Soviet system was not viable in the long run and that its international over-extension would lead eventually to its implosion. So long as the USSR did not attack us, Kennan argued that we should rely on economic sticks-and-carrots competition, intelligence and diplomacy, and the vitality of capitalist democracies to hem in the threat the communist movement posed. History proved Kennan right.

Containment continues to make sense as a basis for U.S. national security policy in the post-Cold War era. Islamic fundamentalism presents no more of a competitive threat to democratic capitalism than did communism. The costs of “regime change” across the Middle East today are no more sustainable than the “rollback” Kennan opposed in Eastern Europe in the 1950s. Kennan’s argument continues to be relevant:

⁴ *Pentagon Aide Says Clinton Helps Enemy*, N.Y. TIMES, July 20, 2007, at A18.

⁵ Ehsan Ahrari, *George F. Kennan: The Passing of a Giant*, March 20, 2005, <http://www.ehsanahrari.com/articles.php?id=199>.

⁶ Massimo Calabresi, *Bush’s Risky Vietnam Gambit*, TIME, August 23, 2007, available at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1655516,00.html>.

Rather than lump our adversaries together and give them common cause, we should take advantage of their differences. This is the opposite of the Bush administration's "Axis of Evil" approach.

In the post-Cold War world, however, containment faces new challenges. Terrorist groups move around and they often operate out of rogue nations and failed states. For these reasons, global terrorism must be confronted on a global basis. This might even involve the need for military action, as was required to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.

But, the first President Bush (George H.W. Bush) understood something that is lost on his son: Sustainable military action against post-Cold War threats requires more than just unilateral action buttressed by opportunistic "coalitions of the willing." Rather, it must be authorized by international institutions and supported by large coalitions in which there is strong representation from countries in the local region.

In the post-Cold War world, facing down the expansion of tyranny might require a military response to belligerence even when this does not involve strict U.S. self-defense, but rather the vital interests of allies or coalition partners. For this purpose alone, the U.S. should be willing to support international containment. Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait is a case in point. Hussein's campaign was an unprovoked exercise of aggression that clearly called for a response by democracies committed to resisting the spread of domination in the region. International action with strong regional participation is consequently needed partly for pragmatic reasons; it provides the U.S. and its allies the necessary authority to retaliate legitimately even when they are not acting in a matter of self-defense.

Moreover, countries in the region, where military action is unfolding, are likely to have vital interests at stake and are potential spoilers. Their participation in an international coalition helps scotch the perception that far-off powers are acting because of imperial motives. Participation of Arab countries in the Middle East during the U.S. effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait was important for all of these reasons. The lack of comparable cooperation during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 has compounded our difficulties there significantly.

Pursuing containment on a global basis typically requires cooperation from other nations. This was certainly true for the containment of Iraq after 1991. And in the current military effort in Iraq, it is sometimes argued that the singularly U.S. containment regime against Saddam Hussein's Iraq was failing by 2002—as indicated by the fact that he agreed to allow United Nations ("UN") weapons inspectors to return *only once* American troops were massing on the Iraqi border. If we grant this argument, it reveals the limits of unilateral action. As a containment regime, the U.S. troop build-up in 2003 was unsustainable. Everyone knew that we could not keep troops amassed on the Iraqi border throughout the summer of 2003, thus presenting the Bush Administration with the conundrum that the U.S. would either have to invade or to withdraw (in which case Hussein could have expelled the weapons inspectors again).

If, instead, President George W. Bush had put together the kind of coalition his father had assembled in 1991, troops from different nations could have rotated in and out, keeping up pressure on Saddam Hussein. To this, it might be objected that too few powers would have agreed to participate in this effort, making it unsustainable. Perhaps so, but limited participation suggests, in turn, that the U.S. could not prove or was exaggerating the threat Iraq posed. Indeed, if major powers would not participate and Iraq's neighbors did not feel sufficiently threatened to get involved, this should have been a warning that the WMD threat in Iraq might just be a paper tiger.

Regional participation is needed to make containment sustainable. If the U.S. insists upon going it alone all over the globe, our bluff will be called time and again for the reason Kennan gave: The American people will not support it down the stretch and opponents will know it. The Iraq Study Group understood this when it insisted that we begin working with Syria and Iran to contain the terrorist threats that many agree will continue to emanate from Iraq for a long time to come.⁷ More generally, as the retired U.S. Army Colonel Joseph Núñez has argued, we need NATO-like organizations on every continent to contain terrorist groups and sectarian conflicts in failed states.⁸

This is not to say we should trust the Syrians or be sanguine about Iran's nuclear ambitions. But containment means talking to our enemies; just as a strategic opening to China was helpful in containing the USSR, so too will a strategic opening to Iran be helpful in containing the terrorism that will otherwise emanate from Iraq. Iran would face major problems with its own Kurdish population if Iraq broke up, not to mention a major refugee crisis. Iran also shares an interest with the U.S. in not seeing the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan. These are among the reasons that the Mullahs in Iran have been signaling a desire to work with Washington. This is, of course, not to deny that Iran will also need to be contained, just as China had to be contained during the Cold War after President Nixon went to Beijing. We often share some common interests with our adversaries, making it feasible and sometimes necessary to work with them.

Regional participation is important also for normative reasons. Nations bordering on an expansionist power will have major, possibly vital, interests at stake. This gives them a strong claim to a say and to a role in the defensive response. To this, it might be objected that, if the regional actors are not democracies, why should democratic nations respect the appeal of these governments concerning their affected interests? Why should we care about Kuwait's interests, let alone those of Syria or Iran?

But the failure of others to respect the principle of affected interest is not a good reason for democratic nations to flout it. Moreover, the leaders of democracies have an interest in encouraging non-democracies to adopt democratic norms and to play by democratic rules when they operate internationally—whether in institutions like the UN or in more informal consultations and coalitions between nations. The more non-democratic governments accept the democratic norm's legitimacy in one context, the more they legitimate it in others—making it harder to resist domestic demands for democratic reform.

The authorization of international institutions matters for reasons both practical and normative. On the practical front, it is often UN officials from development and other agencies on the ground who have access to pertinent information. This is especially the case as far as weak and failed states are concerned; it is often these people who know the details of different warlords' capacities and agendas, where the weak points in borders are, and other relevant street-level information. Moreover, international authorization of containment coalitions enhances their stability. It is harder for a country to withdraw from participation after committing its resources through an international legal process, such as a UN security council resolution, than when it is merely a coalition "of the willing"—of which a new and different administration might take a different view. Gordon Brown's replacement of Tony Blair and the prompt withdrawal of British troops from Iraq is a case in point.

⁷ THE IRAQ STUDY GROUP, *THE IRAQ STUDY GROUP REPORT* (U.S. Institute of Peace 2006), available at http://www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf.

⁸ Joseph Núñez, Op-Ed., *One NATO Is Not Enough*, N.Y. TIMES, January 27, 2007, at A17.

But the most important reasons for international authorization are normative. If major powers act either unilaterally or via coalitions of the willing when they are not themselves under threat of imminent attack, they lack principled authority for their actions. As a result, they are likely to be seen as imperialistic, opportunistic, or both. The 1991 Gulf War and the 2001 action against Afghanistan garnered worldwide support partly because they were authorized by the UN Security Council. This stands in stark contrast the 2003 Iraq war, which continues widely to be seen as a rogue American action against a country that posed no regional or global threat. Rather than undermine the UN at every turn, as the Bush administration has done, the major democratic powers should strengthen the UN, and then work through it to face down domination. There is no alternative if we are to have an effective *global* strategy against international terror in general, and against terrorist threats emanating from Iraq specifically.