

REPORT

War on Terrorism: Impact on South Asia Security Dynamics

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The United Service Institution (USI) in New Delhi hosted a talk on Impact of the War on Terrorism in the Security Dynamics of South Asia by Dr. Robert G. Wirsing of the Asia Pacific Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. Adding other points to the talk were his colleagues Dr. Mohan Malik, a student of India-China relations and Prof. Paul Smith, a specialist on transnational issues, both also residents of the Center. Below is a report on the main issues raised.

Dr. Robert G. Wirsing: As seen from Washington, the war on terrorism has three models:

- The Moral messianic model
- The Geopolitical model and
- The Transnational model

The Moral messianic model:

The war on terrorism is seen in moral, even messianic terms. This view is perhaps best exemplified by Dr. James Wolsey, former chief of the Central Intelligence Agency. He has argued that World War IV is in fact here and has been underway for some decades. He defines this war largely in Islamic terms although it is not a war against Islam. Wolsey believes that this war on terrorism is made up of three separate and distinct wars:

- The first war is that exemplified by Shia militancy which emanates from Iran
- The second is Sunni Wahabism as it emanates from Saudi Arabia, ironically a close US ally and
- The third is Fascism of the kind represented by President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Wolsey absolves only Turkey among the 45 Islamic states of involvement in the war on terrorism. Wolsey's views are admittedly hard-line and it is shared to a considerable degree among influential people in the Bush administration and also in the Pentagon.

The Geopolitical model:

This is a war for influence and power in Asia, for access to energy, access to markets, control of checkpoints and borders. It's a new episode in the old Great Game. It's no accident that American troops are present in such great numbers in the oil-rich states of Central Asia. This model precludes the role of Islam, dismissing it as an "accident of geography". The war would be there even if Islam were not present in the region.

The Transnational model:

In this model, the war on terrorism is seen as the world's first transnational war. The enemy is not a state, it is not visible and in fact comprises shadowy networks, non-state actors that transfer information, money, images across the world in furtherance of their cause. The internet has given them access to technology and the power to forge an entirely new battleground. Islam is exploiting these new forces, so in that sense, Islam is central to this model.

Impact on South Asia:

The war on terrorism has changed the political landscape of this region. It has toppled and ousted the Taliban in Afghanistan, it has also pushed Pakistan, however reluctantly, onto the path of reform. All this has been accompanied by a spectacular and phenomenal expansion in the US military presence in Asia. It's not clear, however, how long the US intends to stay.

The US presence has also set back the effort initiated during the Clinton Administration to drop the hyphen in policy towards India and Pakistan. Matthew Daly, a senior Clinton official, had said the US intended to deal with India and Pakistan separately and build ties with both. That has been undone because the US involvement in Afghanistan has brought back the old balancing element in US policy. In that sense, the hyphen is back.

The strategic uncertainties in the region have multiplied with old alliances no longer holding good. All states, certainly China, because of the US presence in Afghanistan has had to rethink the calculus of its involvement, whether for instance, Pakistan would continue to be the useful ally it has been.

The India-Pakistan experience on Kashmir has been cast in an entirely new light. From a period when Kashmir was perceived internationally in human rights terms, today Kashmir in the US is perceived as an episode in terror. This is an important dimension.

So how does this war on terrorism run? Is it really so transformational, marking a new epoch in international relations. In my view, its importance has been exaggerated. It has been said that the attack on the World Trade Center would not figure in the list of 100 catastrophes that have devastated the world in the last 100 years. What is happening in Asia today is a purely transitory phenomenon and it would be highly dangerous to interpret everything going in this part of the world purely through the lens of terrorism.

Dr. Mohan Malik:

Focus on the geopolitical dimension with respect to the impact on China of the events following from 9/11. This is also crucial from India's point of view.

Impact on China:

China is one major power which has been profoundly affected by 9/11. Pre-9/11 China was seen as a power on the move. Whether in the case of the EP-3 incident where the US was compelled to apologise; or in its strategic encirclement of South Asia by cultivating Pakistan, Myanmar; or even in economic terms, where China was perceived as a powerful trading nation.

But post 9-11 China has been checkmated and the US is seen as the power which is “on a roll”. Although China has supported America’s war on terrorism, the conditions/requests she made to the US were ignored. These included:

- China’s preference for the UN to take the lead in the war on terrorism
 - China’s inability to get the US to categorise the movements in Tibet and Xinjiang in terms of terrorism
 - China’s support for Pakistan’s espousal of a role for the “moderate Taliban” (dismissed by India as an oxymoron) met with no success
 - China’s inability to stop US arms sales to Taiwan

Pragmatically, however, China saw the events of 9/11 as an opportunity to rebuild relations with the US for short-term tactical gains. China needs American technology and access to US markets. Beijing viewed in a positive light the US consultations with China at various stages of the war on terrorism. This was seen as placing limits on American unilateralism. It was important also that “all weather friend” Pakistan, after 10 years of estrangement and abandonment is now back in the US fold. This was seen as helpful to China-US relations. The US could get bogged down in a Vietnam-type situation in Afghanistan. This would be to China’s advantage.

But the war on terrorism has developed in ways Beijing never anticipated. Today, India is buying weapons from Russia and the US apart from other countries like Israel. Serious differences persist with the US on Tibet, human rights and religious freedoms. The US has refused to hand over to China several Uighurs who were involved on the side of the Taliban and Al-Qaida. Close China allies Iran, Iraq and Syria have been branded as terrorist nations. Beijing has made significant strategic investments in these countries and US action against them could evoke a Chinese response.

The US is seen to have emerged stronger from the war. In Beijing’s point of view, the unipolar world has turned into a Pax Americana and the US is present all along China’s periphery. Beijing will have to take countermeasures. China is critical of the US designation of certain countries as the “Axis of Evil” and is apprehensive of figuring on an American list of seven countries against whom “contingency plans” exist. The US determination to use tactical nuclear weapons is also seen as a threat.

Increasingly, the Shanghai Forum is seen to have been marginalised. It was the only multilateral forum dominated by China (and Russia) in which the US did not figure. Now, the US has emerged as the de facto power in Central Asia. China is also seeing the revival of an old Asian rival Japan. For the first time since World war II, Japan sent its naval vessels into the Indian Ocean. The steady development in Indo-US ties has been extensively written and commented

upon in the Chinese media and the verdict is the same: It is a threat. In sum, it seems China's major foreign policy gains of the last decade have been wiped out.

China's Options: For the next few years, China will wait and see how the war on terrorism, especially in terms of the situation in Afghanistan, develops. China would begin to move only if the US does not pull its troops out of the region. That China is preparing the ground for that eventuality is evident: President Jiang Zemin recently visited Libya and Syria and there is every possibility it will transfer second generation nukes and missiles to countries in this region. It will also put pressure on Asia to choose sides while at the same time it will engage Japan and India in an effort to prevent them from allying completely with the US.

Prof. Paul Smith:

9/11 was caused by 24 terrorists with a minimum of weapons and it changed the psychology of the American people. In a like manner, the attack on the Indian Parliament compelled India to mobilise its troops on the border with Pakistan. The latter has responded in a similar way.

The international situation has been dramatically altered by these 24 men. What we are getting here is a glimpse of how war will be waged in the 21st century. Where terrorists aided by technology proliferation and weapons proliferation, can take on states with a degree of parity never done before, Groups like Al-Qaida have become complex international networks supported by narcotraffickers and others. What is happening is the emergence of the dominance of transnational issues as the threats to states.

The traditional paradigm where threats only came from other states no longer holds true. Non-state threats are now increasingly evident. Why is this happening?

- Globalisation and the discontent and economic pressures it has generated worldwide is being used as a cloak by terrorist groups to conceal and give a respectable cover for their activities
- The internet has facilitated technology transfer giving terrorist groups powers of destruction that they never had before
- Porous state borders allow terrorist groups ease of movement, facilitate the collection of funds and propagation of their ideology. Immigration controls are a fiction in most parts of the world
- Population growth will be most evident in the developing world and this is expected to last until the year 2025. This has enormous political and economic implications for the people living in those countries
- The proliferation of arms and war related technologies including nuclear chemical and biological weapons is one of the most serious threats in the new century. In the hands of non-state actors, such weapons could be used to deadly effect. This is one of the greatest fears in the US. It was not there before 9/11
- The US military is in a state of overreach but this cannot be helped given the prevailing situation and the need to defend America's vital interests.

What we are seeing today is a convergence of crime and terrorism which is going to pose new challenges to traditional law enforcement and agencies tasked with internal security. The

blurring of distinctions calls for government agencies to re-tune their traditional modes of functioning and look beyond jealously defended turfs.

There has in fact been an unprecedented sharing of intelligence on an international level since 9/11. But it seems to me that it is more the US which is receiving information. It is sharing little. So that psychology has yet to change.

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