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Fighting the scourge of terrorism: Inter-state relations and regional stability in southern Asia

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Asia accounts for three-quarters of all terrorism casualties worldwide. With the world's most serious hot spots, Asia holds the key to the future of the global war on terror. While the entire expanse from West Asia to Southeast Asia is home to militant groups and troubled by terrorist violence, much of Asia's terrorist violence is concentrated in its southern belt. This belt, encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Chinese-ruled Xinjiang and Tibet, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, is wracked by terrorist, insurgent and separatist violence in a manner unmatched elsewhere in the world.

The spread of militancy and terrorism in southern Asia is linked to the Afghan war of the 1980s and the U.S. and Saudi funnelling of arms to the anti-Soviet guerrillas through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. The Afghan war veterans have come to haunt the security of many countries. Now, a new breed of sophisticated terrorists – many with ties to the old lot – is emerging.

The terror attacks since 9/11, in fact, signal the new face of terrorism: Indiscriminate, large-scale killing of civilians to achieve an absolute victory of radical Islam over the West. This is very different from the objectives of the traditional terrorists, such as those in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and Spain's Basque region, for whom selective use of terror has been a means to strengthen their negotiating leverage and advance ethnic or sectarian interests.

Battling the new breed of terrorists would require varying, ad hoc political coalitions in the world. The scourge of transnational terrorism, however, cannot be stemmed if attempts are made to draw distinctions between good and bad terrorists, and between those who threaten *their* security and those who threaten *ours*. The viper reared against one target-state is a viper against another or against oneself.

In southern Asia, terrorism has become an important factor in inter-state relations (as between Pakistan and India, and Pakistan and Afghanistan) and in regional security. India and Pakistan almost came to war after the December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that could have wiped out India's elected leadership. Although tensions have subsided and the two countries are now engaged in a process of dialogue and cooperation, cross-border terrorism remains a key issue. Today, what has been described as Pakistan's *jihad* culture is beginning to haunt its own security, as evidenced by the assassination attempts not only on military ruler Pervez Musharraf but also on Shaukat Aziz (now prime minister) and a top general, Ahsan Saleem Hayat.

Building regional stability and cooperation in southern Asia demands inter-state collaboration against the forces of terror. The challenge is to create a framework for such anti-terrorist cooperation. For that to happen, however, the global war on terror needs to be salvaged first.

A year and half after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the U.S.-led global war on terror stands derailed, even as the scourge of terrorism has spread to more nations. The U.S. occupation of Iraq has proved divisive in international relations, splitting the world and fracturing the post-9/11 global consensus to fight terror.

Instead of targeting terrorist cells and networks wherever they exist, U.S. President George W. Bush is being compelled by critics at home and abroad to justify his invasion of Iraq. In the process, it has been virtually forgotten that 9/11 happened not because of Iraq but because of the terrorist nurseries in the Afghanistan-Pakistan belt. In fact, by speciously linking Iraq with the Al Qaeda to justify its invasion, Washington created a self-fulfilling prophesy that now haunts it.

International terrorism threatens the very existence of democratic, secular states. Regrettably, the Iraq occupation has not only aggravated a Muslim-Christian divide in the world, it has also given a new lease of life to the Al Qaeda by handing it a fresh cause. It is time that the anti-terror war was brought back on course through renewed international consensus.

The only defense against the sly, murderous terrorists is offense aimed at hounding, disrupting, and smashing their cells, networks, and safe havens. Against covert, unconventional aggression, counteraction must also employ clandestine, unconventional methods in order to strike at the heart of a terrorist group and disrupt its cohesion, credibility, and operational capacity. Never before has there been a greater need for close international and regional cooperation on intelligence and law enforcement, especially because of the stateless nature of some terrorists. And no region needs such cooperation more than southern Asia.

It will, however, require a sustained campaign to eliminate forces that pursue violence as a sanctified tool of religion and a path to redemption. The war against terrorism is critical to the protection of the freedoms and tolerant spirit of pluralistic societies. Needless to say, the role of the United States is central to the sustainability of any such campaign. The United States has to first ensure that it does not repeat the very mistakes of the past that have come to trouble its security and that of the rest of the free world.

To help reclaim the global fight against terror, the United States needs to learn the lessons from its past policies that gave rise to Osama bin Laden, Mullah Mohammed Omar and Saddam Hussein. Even if bin Laden were captured, his seizure – like that of Saddam – is unlikely to provide a respite.

The first lesson is to keep the focus on longer-term goals and not be carried away by political expediency and narrow objectives. By focusing on immediate goals, U.S. policymakers in the past ended up creating monsters that they now have to fight.

A second lesson is not to turn the war against terrorism into an ideological battle to serve one's strategic interests. The Bush team is widely seen to have employed the anti-terror war to expand U.S. military, diplomatic and energy interests in an unprecedented manner and position U.S. forces in the largest array of nations since World War II.

Another lesson is that the problem of and solution to terrorism are linked. Terrorism not only threatens the free, secular world but also springs from the rejection of democracy and secularism. The terrorism-breeding swamps can never be fully drained as long as the societies that rear or tolerate them are not de-radicalized and democratized.

The war on terror, in the final analysis, can be won only by inculcating a secular and democratic ethos in societies steeped in religious and political bigotry. That means building and sustaining an international consensus and promoting regional cooperation against terrorism.