

The International Implications of the Terrorist Attacks

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The terrorist assault of September 11 2001 and the world's reaction to it have opened up a "great debate" on the international implications of these developments. The spectrum of assessments lies between two intellectual extremes. One postulates that *everything* has changed in the international system, with the latter entering a new era that will see traditional values, norms, interests, orientations, political instincts and behavioral patterns of major actors radically modified. The proponents of the opposite approach argue that basically *nothing* has changed; however dramatic these events might have been, they do not invalidate fundamental factors determining the international developments, even if highlighting some of the ongoing trends.

This brief article attempts to draw an analytical line between these two intellectual poles. It reflects (and is influenced by) the ongoing debates in Russia on this issue, although by no means sums them up or pretends to define a common denominator of the various (and often conflicting) assessments. Although all "post-September 11" international implications are closely interrelated, this article – for analytical purposes – distinguishes three dimensions of the problem by (i) speculating upon the eventual impact on US foreign policy, (ii) considering the consequences for international developments at large and (iii) focusing upon the possible effects for Russia.

Impact on US policy

Already at a very early stage in the development of the post-attack political line, there seemed to be a juxtapositioning of the proponents of rigid and energetic counteractions with advocates of a more balanced approach. For the former, the aim was to compensate for the demoralising effect of the terrorist assault

(described as a “new Pearl Harbor”) with a lightning-quick retaliation of large-scale military strikes. For the latter, the main emphasis was upon organising a long-term and well planned struggle against international terrorism which would eventually envisage the use of military force when necessary, at the same time avoiding insufficiently pondered and ill-prepared actions with uncertain results and highly probable negative implications for the US.

Although the first line looked emotionally appealing immediately after the attacks, the more moderate approaches later gained the upper hand. Nevertheless, implicit and explicit competition and interaction of these two lines will most probably affect the course of US foreign and military policy in the longer run.

Both approaches will be strongly affected by the emergence of two basically new factors for America’s self-identification with respect to the outside world: first, the US has become aware that its territory is vulnerable and its protection against external threats a myth; second, there are forces whose anti-Americanism knows no limits and who are ready to undertake the most horrifying actions against the United States. This in itself creates strong incentives for significant shifts in the American course in the international arena – shifts that could be characterised in the following way.

- US policy could become more assertive and offensive. The theme of isolationism that has always been present in US foreign policy thinking, even if in a latent way, will be moved to the background. American society has been provided with dramatic evidence that terrorism can reach US territory and that it is impossible to isolate itself from the rest of the world. The “Vietnam/Somalia syndrome” will be overcome. The consolidation of elites, as well as of society as a whole is taking place around the idea of taking preventive actions rather than drawing aside.
- The emphasis upon the readiness to use force in the international arena will become more pronounced. Support will grow for energetic military actions in case problems emerge outside US territory. Psychologically, there will be a readiness to bear considerable losses in US military personnel – a fundamental shift with respect to the until now predominant orientation of carrying out only such actions in which casualties would be minimal or even zero, as in the case of the Kosovo campaign.
- Sooner or later, the US government will have to present the US public with some concrete results of its struggle against terrorism. This might become an incentive for broadening military operations and perhaps re-orientating them towards areas where the chances of achieving an impressive victory are greater, for instance, in Iraq or Somalia.
- Self-restraint with respect to the rest of the world might be further eroded. In its extreme form, this approach would insist that the United States proceed with complete freedom of action in the international arena and decide on what is to be done without paying attention to constraints or advice. The general

indignation against the terrorist acts and the ensuing readiness to support US counteractions (or, at least, to treat them “with understanding”) will make it easier to legitimate US assertiveness and its right to intervene.

- Another hypertrophied stereotype could develop: that the US should count only on itself and should refrain from illuding itself about possible aid from other international actors. At the same time, other countries’ attitudes towards the US struggle against terrorism will be a criteria for US policy towards them (“those who are not with us are against us”).
- On the issue of national missile defence (NMD), the arguments of its supporters might become more convincing. Although the events of September 11 have clearly shown that no missile defence can protect against terrorism, they have also proven that a terrifying scenario of a missile attack against the US homeland by terrorists or irresponsible regimes should not be considered “unthinkable” – which makes protection against such an eventuality imperative.
- A racist and anti-Muslim mood in the US might be another consequence of the terrorist assault, resulting in a new emphasis on US policy in the Middle East, as well as new suspicions towards “rogue states” and a more energetic policy line with respect to those countries believed to support them.

However, this scenario could be mitigated considerably by alternative factors. They have, in fact, turned out to be more dynamic than could have been expected on the basis of the new US administration’s record during the first months. This line promotes would-be US priorities in a different way.

- When developing the means and methods of fighting terrorism, there will be a sufficiently clear understanding that the huge US military potential is not a panacea and does not in itself guarantee successful counteractions against new threats. The means to be used against terrorists could be considered in a more flexible way, in particular, by putting stronger emphasis on political and financial “tools” (flanking or even replacing military tools as the main means).
- Developing a large anti-terrorist coalition will require support from many states, thus creating a counterweight to the unilateralist approach.
- While the initial US reaction seemed absolutely indifferent towards the idea of legitimising retaliation (via the UN, international law or in some other way), this line was later reconsidered in a radical way and almost overnight.
- The official policy has attempted to downgrade emotional and spontaneous anti-Muslim reactions. Indeed, these could have serious negative implications for US domestic developments and for foreign policy. Furthermore, the US has attempted to deepen its involvement in the Middle East settlement by pressuring *both* sides of the conflict rather than backing Israel unconditionally. At the same time, there seem to be the preconditions for a review of US policy with respect to “friendly” repressive regimes in the Arab world, above all Saudi Arabia.

- The US leadership would have to explore ways of redesigning the country's negative international image. Some thinking should be done about the fact that one of the most powerful sources of anti-American terrorism is the widespread perception of the US as a powerful but complacent and arrogant state searching to impose its norms, life-style and values all over the world without feeling the need to observe common rules and take the views of other countries into account. The overall mood prevailing today in the US does not seem to be conducive to this kind of reflection. However, the country objectively needs serious debate on what responsible international leadership means. American thinking might hopefully turn in this direction at some future time.

The interaction of all these trends will build a conceptual and practical framework for future US foreign and security policy. This will include a robust anti-terrorist element, but will most probably be oriented towards broader goals going beyond anti-terrorist considerations while perhaps retaining some traditional geopolitical motives.

Implications for the international system

The implications for the international system will be defined by two sets of factors. The first lies within the psychological realm: how dramatically and seriously will new challenges be assessed? The second concerns politics: how can the new developments affect patterns of interaction in the world arena and, accordingly, their structural characteristics?

- The struggle against terrorism might increasingly be given priority over the other international tasks of states. Yet, this refocusing will most probably develop slowly. The traditional approach, with its focus on state interests and the maximization of state influence against a background of competition with other international actors, will probably continue as the predominant factor of international developments for some time to come. The erosion of this inertia will be commensurate with the understanding that the very institution of the state is under threat, with prospects of chaos and unpredictable consequences.
- The logic of "protecting the state" from dangerous external influences will become more salient, including toughening border protection, limiting migration flows, controlling emigrants, regulating flows of information and so on. If this happens, the degree of "openness" of states will decrease.
- There will be increasing informational, operational and strategic interactions among states' special services. The process will certainly develop slowly and within certain limits as it touches upon areas of extreme sensitivity. However, the very fact of cooperative interaction in such sensitive areas will bring a new

qualitative characteristic to international relations.

- The forceful US reaction to the terrorist attack might become a model for other states' behaviour under circumstances that they consider threatening to their vital interests (with threats coming first of all, but not exclusively from international terrorism). In a broader sense, there are reasons to expect a lowering of the political and psychological barriers preventing the use of force. This tool could become "less unacceptable" than it used to be.
- The ongoing developments could result in an erosion of international law and expectations with respect to the United Nations. In discussions on ways to react to terrorist attacks, both have been relegated to the sidelines.
- All these trends could make the international system more unbalanced and vulnerable to crisis. The task of ensuring its manageability will become even more demanding than it is today.
- Formal or informal interaction among states belonging to the narrow circle of most powerful international actors could increasingly be seen as the most effective tool of international governance. Their decisions, even if not based on international law or formalised in political documents, could become more important than those adopted in multilateral fora of cooperation. The international system shaped by such developments would be characterised by the *de facto* preponderance of a few states over the others – a preponderance that could be increasingly perceived and accepted as legitimate, and that could even be formalised in some respects.
- Such an oligarchic system could have a certain effectiveness and prevent chaotic developments. However, its legitimacy will be challenged by internal tensions generated by inequalities in status, level of development, resources and access to decision-making. At the same time, it might also exacerbate civilizational divides within the world community, which could well be the terrain of the most serious crises of the twenty-first century.

In a parallel way, international affairs could develop along other lines, to some extent correcting the above mentioned trends.

- Accompanying recognition of US leadership, there will probably be continued or even increased concern about its transformation into a clear-cut hegemon – which other international actors will try to neutralise and minimise.
- Many developing countries will feel uneasy about the possibility of the struggle against international terrorism being projected onto their territories. This will lead to their focusing on international law and the non-violability of sovereignty.
- The dissatisfaction with the UN's poor performance could become an incentive for more energetic efforts to bolster its effectiveness (enlarging the number of permanent seats in the Security Council, increasing its ability to react operationally to crises, developing new norms within the UN, etc).
- The debate on globalisation will be affected as well. One can expect growing

attention to its fundamental problem, that is the increasing gap between the centre and the periphery in the world system – a gap that creates the conditions for international terrorism.

- In a paradoxical way, the terrorist attacks could have painful implications for NATO. It has turned out to be irrelevant for responding to new security challenges in terms of its functional specificity, or organisation, structure and operational mode. The Alliance needs a “great debate” over its future agenda. It will involve a number of thorny issues, including re-orientation from common defence towards peacekeeping and peace-enforcement, joint operations beyond Europe, and the search for a new formula of interaction with Russia.

The considerable implications of the phenomenon of terrorism notwithstanding, some important lines of international political development will hardly be directly affected. Thus, the emergence of new power poles, such as China and India, as well as the rapid and impetuous evolution of the world of Islam will continue to generate their own dynamics in the international arena.

Eventual consequences for Russia

Russia has to pass between Scylla and Charibdis. It is vitally interested in the success of the struggle against international terrorism – but also in preventing the struggle from being re-oriented against Russia. For many reasons, including some not connected with the issue of international terrorism, Russia is interested in cooperative interaction with the US and the West in general – without, however, becoming their submissive partner and without damaging Russia’s relations with the Muslim world. Like any other country, Russia has to define a proper correlation between terrorism-related factors and other challenges in the international arena.

- Russia’s decision to cooperate closely with the US in the post- September 11 anti-terrorist campaign has positive implications for its relations with the US and more generally the West. Both seem deeply impressed by the political and practical support Russia is providing and seem to consider it indicative of Russia’s long-term foreign policy orientations.
- The current situation is unique. Russia is being solicited not only as a partner, but as a key partner whose involvement is, in some respects, irreplaceable. Russia has the chance to transform this unprecedented Western demand for its involvement into a new quality of its relationship with the West. Achieving this quality is more important than formalising it in haste.
- Many Russian observers insist on linking Russia’s position directly with other aspects of relations with the West (ABM Treaty, Chechnya, debts and so on). Such an approach could turn out to be counterproductive in that it might provoke doubts about Russia’s motives for involvement in the struggle against terrorism. Furthermore, Western partners could find rapprochement with Russia on these issues problematic if it is perceived as the result of pressure

from Moscow and its attempts to play the “anti-terrorist card”. In fact, many issues that are important to Russia, including those that have been a matter of serious disagreement, could be treated (and actually *are* treated) more cooperatively by the West – but in the context of a qualitatively new partnership with Moscow rather than as an immediate reward for the policy stand taken by Russia.

- It is clear that Russia’s support for the United States does not mean that it is ready to give the green light to any sort of anti-terrorist activity of Washington, not to speak of broader freedom of action. But Russia does not have to be in the front lines in constraining the expansionist drive of the United States. In this, other international actors, from NATO allies to China and India, can also play a role (and perhaps pay the bill).
- A similar approach would be appropriate in developing the legal basis for combating international terrorism. There is an objective need for it, and it would be quite natural for Russia to play an active role in addressing this task. The problem is that the fight against international terrorism is an urgent task, while appropriate international legal instruments are not yet in place. Insisting on strict compliance with international law should not prevent energetic actions against terrorism. Also, when highlighting the role of the United Nations in establishing international governance, it is important to assess realistically the prospects of the UN reforms – prospects that do not look encouraging.
- The development of a quasi-alliance relationship between the United States and Russia does not diminish the latter’s fear of being relegated to the status of junior partner. One way to offset this asymmetry would be to emphasise multilateral forms of interaction with Western countries. Hence, Russia could be interested in promoting greater equilibrium through development of the NATO-Russia Partnership and trilateral Russia-EU-US relations.

Russia will face key geopolitical problems in Central Asia. The US presence in this area is a fundamentally new factor. There are apprehensions in Russia that this presence might be used to assert US hegemony in the area, both in the CIS countries and in Afghanistan, and to weaken Russia’s influence.

Russia does have political resources for energetic measures with which to counteract and/or limit the American presence in the area. But this would result in an erosion of the developing Russian-American partnership and risk transforming Central Asia into a stage for new geopolitical rivalry – with unpredictable consequences. A more rational strategy could be based on a different foundation, aimed not so much at counteracting as interacting in a cooperative manner with the United States in this area. In this context, of primary importance is the involvement of the United States in combating those challenges that Russia faces on its southern borders.

A separate issue concerns Russia’s relationship with the Muslim world. The enormous importance of this relationship for Russia is obvious. Russia’s interests

here are of a strategic rather than opportunistic nature and should not be sacrificed to motivations emerging from the Western dimension of Russia's interaction with the outside world. The goal should be not to play the two dimensions off against one another, but to strive to achieve an organic combination of the two, so that Muslim countries would see Russia's participation in a strategic alliance with the West as advantageous for themselves, while the West would proceed from an awareness of Russia's ability to play an important role in shaping its relationship with the Islamic world. And this is all the more important in that this line will be a central one in the international political dynamics of the twenty-first century.