

# Asia needs to chart its own course in the war on terrorism

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**THE SCALE AND INTENSITY** of the September 11 attacks, carried out in the heart of US territory, shocked the world for their sophistication, planning and co-ordination – and they rudely shattered the myth of American invincibility. If the world's only superpower could be so vulnerable to terrorism, who could consider themselves safe?

The US failure to prevent the attacks meant it could not “go it alone” this time. Asia has become home to some very dangerous terrorist organisations that target US interests, US citizens and the US government from abroad, and the practical dilemma has become a sharp one. On the one hand, the US must co-operate with some unsavoury governments, but on the other, it wishes to avoid entanglement in the domestic priorities of foreign governments.

So the US has chosen to provide military assistance for search-and-destroy missions targeting the Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and al-Qaeda and their sympathisers along the northern frontier of Pakistan and in Afghanistan itself – but always on US terms and according to US priorities – under the name of “multilateralism”. It has also resumed limited aid to the Indonesian military, which is pursuing rebels in Aceh province.

However, terrorism will not be beaten in Asia or elsewhere by following the policy priorities of only one country – even if that country remains the world's only superpower. Terrorism is everyone's problem and it demands genuinely multilateral responses, not just multilateral rhetoric. International conventions and mechanisms at global and regional levels have been painstakingly developed with the active participation of the US to institutionalise regular co-operation in criminal matters, and they should be further strengthened, not weakened.

And the new International Criminal Court could prosecute many kinds of terrorist acts that qualify as “crimes against humanity” or “war crimes”. Instead, the Bush administration has attacked the court and has even exempted its troops stationed in foreign countries from its jurisdiction.

Is the US committed to multilateralism?



Cleverly placing Taleban and al-Qaeda fighters in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, deprives them of US due process and civil liberties guarantees, while the government at the same time refuses to provide humanitarian protection according to the universally recognised Geneva Conventions. Is this genuine multilateralism?

Terrorism reaches beyond national borders and threatens international peace. Truly multilateral approaches must be used, otherwise everything has to be done on a bilateral basis that places Washington at the centre of the international political and legal responses to terrorism.

But this clumsy approach cannot be successful over the longer term because it cannot provide a comprehensive framework for striking at terrorist networks in the interests of the international community as a whole. Once the US achieves its own specific anti-terrorism goals in foreign countries according to its own domestic priorities, it will order its troops home, more or less at a moment of its own choosing.

Bilateral relationships have their place, but they cannot be the only solution. The UN secretary-general, the EU, Canada, and countries around the globe, have severely criticised the Bush administration for its strongly isolationist and unilateralist tendencies on many occasions for these same reasons.

Asian governments have a clear choice. They can adopt a more multilateral approach to fight the global problem of terrorism, or depend more on Washington-centric arrangements. The choice they make will influence not only their success in fighting terrorism over the longer term, but how they will be viewed by the rest of the international community.

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