



SPEAKING OUT

Let's Use International Organizations to Fight Terrorism

BY LEON WEINTRAUB

The Bush administration made it clear from its first day in office that it does not care much for working with international organizations except on its own terms. Indeed, its attitude has often been little more than contemptuous. It has fought climate control measures, worked to dissuade countries from recognizing the authority of the International Criminal Court (e.g., by cutting assistance to countries that refused to sign agreements that would immunize American citizens from ICC jurisdiction), and shown little interest in nonproliferation issues.

The administration's recent decision to cultivate closer ties with India in the field of civilian nuclear activities at the expense of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is emblematic of this mindset. Following the July 2005 visit to Washington of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his office issued a press release which sums up the U.S. decision: "The [India-U.S.] Joint Statement reflects the preparedness, on the part of the U.S. government, to begin a process of dismantling the restrictive technology denial regime that restricted India's access to nuclear technology and materials for [its] not having joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."

Enough has already been said about President Bush's appointment of John Bolton as ambassador to the United Nations in New York. Mr. Bolton has shown himself to be articulate, aggressive, intelligent, fiercely protective of his positions, and more than a little skeptical about the ability of the United Nations to accomplish a

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great deal of major import. It remains to be seen if this combination of characteristics will be an effective mix for promoting U.S. interests in the world body. There should be no doubt, however, that appointing a figure like Bolton, especially during a Senate recess, sends a message about the president's desire to deal with the U.N. on his own terms.

Iraq represents the most blatant instance of this preference for unilateral action — except, of course, when Washington finds it convenient for others to share the burden, such as when it "invited" the United Nations back into Iraq to help conduct the Jan. 30, 2005, elections. Compare the use of the "Coalition of the Willing" of 2003 with President George H.W. Bush's use of such a coalition in 1991 in Operation "Desert Storm" to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. While the current campaign is overwhelmingly conducted by U.S. troops (although with a sizable British contribution), the 1991 military campaign, by contrast, made use of more than 500,000 U.S. troops supplemented by

160,000 coalition forces, or almost 25 percent of the total force, according to a CNN Web-based fact sheet. That earlier coalition — which included Egypt, Syria, France and Germany in the 34-nation fighting force — was a tremendous accomplishment for which both former President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker deserve great credit. And we should not forget that the other countries in the "Desert Storm" coalition also picked up the lion's share of the first Gulf War's cost.

Good Politics, Bad Policy

This "go it alone" approach is good domestic politics. It certainly reverberated quite well in the 2004 election campaign, when former Senator Zell Miller, D-Ga., told the Republican National Convention that "Senator [John] Kerry has made it clear that he would use military force only if approved by the United Nations. Kerry would let Paris decide when America needs defending." This obvious misrepresentation clearly won over the Republican delegates, but it is downright unhelpful when it comes to fighting terrorism — an area where collective action holds great promise. Yet apart from some post-9/11 measures against money-laundering promoted through the United Nations and the U.S.-backed Financial Action Task Force, there have been few sustained efforts to promote an organized international approach to counterterrorism that would build upon the multilateral strengths of international organizations.

The idea is not to replace U.S. and



other national initiatives, but to supplement and thereby strengthen them.

Regrettably, the interest in such an approach shown by the 9/11 Commission in its well-known report, issued last year, is scarcely better. In its chapter on recommendations (“What to Do: A Global Strategy”), it lists a “firm tripod of policies” that include attacking terrorists and their organizations, preventing the continued growth of Islamist terrorism, and protecting against and preparing for terrorist attacks. True, the text of the chapter includes some peripheral mention of the value of international organizations, such as how Western states meet with each other in NATO or the G-8, or how the international community works through the International Civil Aviation Organization to arrive at agreed standards for passport design. But there is not one recommendation in this otherwise comprehensive report calling for a concerted effort to place greater responsibility on international organizations.

When President Bush spoke to FBI and DEA agents at the FBI Academy this past July, he recited the litany of international locations of terrorist incidents, with “9/11” and London being followed by the mention of Bali, Casablanca, Riyadh, Jakarta, Istanbul and Madrid. The president then cited a “comprehensive strategy in place” for protecting the homeland, improving our intelligence, staying on the offensive and “fighting the enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan and across the world so we do not have to face them here at home.”

In his call to work with our allies, he appropriately praised the FBI, which has “deployed its personnel across the world,” for questioning captured terrorists and uncovering valuable information. But our FBI assets, wherever they may be, will get

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much better and more reliable information if countries around the world believe we are working together with them in a mutually agreed framework to protect each other from the scourge of terrorism — rather than looking out only for ourselves. International organizations might not be a panacea, but they offer hope for global inclusiveness that ad hoc arrangements with key allies cannot match. After all, most of the problems don’t originate with our key allies, but within countries where our relations are often strained, if not quarrelsome.

The Case for Collective Action

Don’t get me wrong. We should have no illusions that an international organization made up of sovereign nation-states, each with its own agenda and with varied approaches toward working with us and other nations and collective entities, is going to solve the problem of terrorism. The often-Byzantine nature of the politics of international organizations and decision-making within them frequently fails to show positive results — either by selecting a country like Libya to

head a human rights body or in dithering away on fruitless debate while 800,000 Rwandans were massacred or acts of genocide continue relentlessly in Darfur.

What international organizations can do, however, is forge a global consensus on an issue and then incrementally push their members to take steps to address problems that have been identified. Consider the issue of international trafficking in drugs, persons or materials. The State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the European Union, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime and the International Organization for Migration (to name just a few) all administer programs dealing with this.

Some of these efforts are mutually reinforcing, while others are developed separately for distinct rationales and are likely duplicative. Wouldn’t it make better sense for one lead agency to have a clear mandate, with the support of the international community, to develop a strategy, gather the appropriate intelligence, and then design and implement the operational activities to carry out that strategy? There would always, of course, be a need for specific components of these programs to be “outsourced” to specific national agencies (especially in the intelligence field). But a mutually reinforcing and layered series of activities pursuing a coordinated strategy would surely be better than the separately designed, funded and implemented programs that we have now (some of which actually compete with each other).

There is a precedent for this approach. When we were confronted with the first OPEC oil embargo in 1973, the insightful leadership and diplomacy of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and others eventually led to the creation of the International Energy Agency. The IEA was no



cure-all, to be sure, but it enabled those countries targeted by the embargo (the U.S. being a primary one) to deal with the difficulties by working together. More than three decades later, the IEA remains active and relevant by focusing on broader energy issues, such as "climate change policies, market reform, energy technology collaboration and outreach to the rest of the world," according to the agency's Web site. Born out of a crisis, the IEA now looks at a broader range of energy-related issues, taking what had earlier been one component of world trade and making it the central focus of a specialized agency.

Similarly, although the U.S. may be a primary target of most terrorist actions, it is clear that terrorist groups, whether they are formally linked to al-Qaida or its spin-offs or are free-

lancers, have an agenda that goes far beyond the United States. Indeed, such attacks, in addition to those that have affected Israel for decades, are taking place on a global basis, from Egypt and Indonesia, to Spain and the United Kingdom. An international structure to deal with this phenomenon that goes beyond ad hoc bilateral or even multilateral alliances could provide for a sustained focus in the so-called "war on terror."

Without that focus, we risk jumping from crisis to crisis without a prolonged and comprehensive approach to the problem. It remains to be seen what specific mandate, operating responsibilities, funding mechanisms and decision-making powers such an organization might have, but it is a subject that merits serious exploration.

Admittedly, we don't know yet if the world or the major victims of terrorism are ready for anything like an "International Counterterrorism Agency." Or, perhaps, rather than creating a new specialized agency, we could do a better job by strengthening the anti-terrorism components of existing agencies, like the U.N.'s Counter-Terrorism Committee, the ICAO, the International Maritime Organization, the World Customs Organization or the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. The last organization is particularly useful in identifying and taking steps to counter the links with drug trafficking and other criminal enterprises that appear to be involved in funding terrorism. And, of course, there is always the International Criminal Police Organization, already known to most of us as

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INTERPOL. All of these agencies, along with those mentioned earlier, such as NATO and the Financial Action Task Force, have a role to play — diplomatically, militarily, controlling smuggling or money laundering, sharing intelligence, carrying out investigations, or even facilitating extradition.

Even if the time has not yet come for one international agency to be given the mandate to fight terrorism in all its manifestations, let us launch a serious international dialogue on the issue. The fact that U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, in his March 2005 report, “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All,” endorsed the working definition of terrorism as proposed by his “High-

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Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change,” leads me to believe that we are approaching a critical point. For if the world community can agree on a working definition of

terrorism, we could be — if we wish to make the journey — on the path to developing a working strategy. And on that basis, perhaps we can design an organizational framework that can be used once and for all to link together the interests of most of the world’s nation states in fighting the scourge of international terrorism. ■

Leon Weintraub retired from the Foreign Service in 2004 after an almost 30-year career. Among many other assignments, he worked on U.N. Security Council affairs during a Washington tour and spent four years at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Geneva. He is currently an adjunct professor of political science at The George Washington University.

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