Epilogue

Asia-Pacific security in the age of the ‘war on terror’

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On 11 September 2004 we commemorated the third anniversary of the tragic events of 9–11. We now know 9–11 as a step in the growing campaign against US power and Western values around the world by extremist Muslim terrorists, but it finally brought the focus of the struggle into the open—in a blaze of publicity to which terrorists characteristically aspire—and ensured that every subsequent action and reaction of transnational terrorism would be refracted through (and magnify) the reputation of al-Qa’ida. Although we remain in the early days of the 21st century, the so-called ‘war on terror’ looks set to be a defining feature of both our hopes and fears for the world into the foreseeable future, and perhaps the defining feature of the century itself. Such a prediction, while perhaps unworthy of the cautious scholar, seems nevertheless not unreasonable in the face of the centrality that has been accorded to this ‘war’ by the most important military and economic power in the world, the United States, and the intractability of the causes and implacability of the authors of this terrorism. For better or worse—and it will become clearer, as this essay proceeds, why I think it is for the worse—the ‘war on terror’ has become the catchcry for political rhetoric and patriotism in the West (always a bad sign), and a rallying cry for an interpretation of Islam that helps to deepen its roots among the poor and humiliated in the Islamic world (even if their discontent has nearer and more mundane sources).

It is not, as should be evident from the thrust of this book, that the world’s other security problems have disappeared. Whether defined in traditional, state-security terms, or in broader, human-security terms, security problems remain, and some have been exacerbated. But they are all being reassessed, recast, and sometimes even obscured in the somewhat peculiar spotlight of the ‘war on terror’. In two respects, in particular, its glare is acting to deepen the world’s insecurity: by casting counter-terrorism as the key to security; and by conflating Muslim terrorists with Islam as a whole. This short epilogue will try to restore a sense of
light and shade to the picture by examining how Asia-Pacific security has been affected by the ‘war on terror’.

Transnational terrorism and regional security
Transnational terrorists have been busy since this book first went to press. There have been terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, Russia, Spain, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Indonesia and elsewhere. In these attacks Muslims have been killed as indiscriminately as non-Muslims. Women and children have been victims. Car bombings have vied with kidnapping and decapitation as favoured methods. The incidents of transnational terrorism are easy to list, because they are designed to have a high visual impact, and are brought to us in our evening television news bulletins, our morning newspapers, and via the world wide web. In Jakarta in September 2004, a car bomb exploded in front of the Australian embassy killing nine and injuring 360. In the same month, Chechen separatists killed about 370, and injured more than 700 when they destroyed a school in North Ossetia, Russia; most of the casualties were children. In Madrid in March 2004, 200 were killed and 1500 injured in the bombing of commuter trains. In Jakarta in August 2003, a car bomb outside the Marriott Hotel resulted in 12 deaths and 160 injured. And since the US military victory in Iraq, terror is blamed for the American and Iraqi victims in a growing insurgency against foreign occupation.

Terrorist activity in the Asia-Pacific region, sometimes allied with criminal and separatist activities, has been notable in Indonesia, the southern Philippines, and southern Thailand. It has exposed the networks of Muslim extremists, gathered under the (somewhat unhelpful) title of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), who wish to create a unified Southeast Asian Islamic state. They have been emboldened both by the worldwide assaults of transnational terrorism, and by widespread opposition to the US war against Iraq. But although the war against Iraq is in my view a diversion from the ‘war on terror’, and has divided the world’s support and sympathy for the United States, Asia-Pacific states are dealing with the problems of transnational terrorism in their region with continuing US assistance. The United States has strengthened a number of key bilateral relationships in the Asia-Pacific. In addition, there is now a greater emphasis on the role for regional security frameworks to deal with the terrorist threats and the transnational crime and money flows that support them. Forums such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Pacific Islands Forum have elevated security and counter-terrorism to the top of their agendas, displacing the previous emphasis on economic cooperation. Ironically, the terrorist threat may do more to enhance a sense of regional identity than economic success. And—again somewhat ironically, given the intent of the terrorists—it may mean greater cooperation between Australia and the region, if only at practical levels of exchanging information and building counter-terrorism capacity.

While the challenges of transnational terrorism are by no means the only ones to disturb regional security, they are nevertheless serious and thoroughgoing.
Successfully confronting them will require a re-think about some fundamental aspects of the way many Asia-Pacific states are governed. That means strengthening governance, so that law and order is assured and corruption minimized: both ways of reducing popular frustration, which can otherwise fuel terrorism. It means civilian administrations reducing the role of the military in domestic affairs, and deciding to expand police and intelligence forces to counter terrorism instead. The political influence of the military had been declining in the region before 9–11, but the story has subsequently become less clear. And it means allowing a greater role to civil society to conduct its own affairs independently of government, within the framework of the rule of law. The campaign that transnational terrorism now wages against modernity (albeit with modernity’s own weapons) may ultimately force a working accommodation between Islam and modernity. Policy makers within and outside the region must ensure that democracy and free speech are given as much support in the Asia-Pacific as is possible.

In Southeast Asia, the challenge of countering transnational terrorism has been taken up most effectively since 9–11 by Singapore and Malaysia, and most poorly by Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia, in particular, has been the site of the most spectacular bombings. But although it has succeeded in detaining and bringing to trial many of those responsible for the Bali and Marriott Hotel bombings, its efforts to close down JI and its affiliates have been ineffectual or nonexistent. Its approach to prevention has been inadequate. JI remains a legal organization, able to distribute propaganda, recruit members and raise funds. The picture of Indonesia’s transition to democracy is mixed, but generally positive. The fact that the military is thus far having a reduced impact on national policy, that freedom of speech is generally respected (despite the recent conviction and jailing of Tempo’s editor), and that the long presidential election campaign of 2004 was conducted in relative peace, are all notable achievements. But fighting terrorism is first about effective laws, police forces, and intelligence agencies. In southern Mindanao, the Muslim insurgency against the Philippines government has established links with JI. The problem here is not so much what the Philippines government wishes to do, but whether it has the capability of enforcing order throughout the country; that is by no means clear.

In the meantime, of course, regional states must deal with a whole range of security issues identified earlier in this book with the resources available to them. China is increasingly important to them in many respects, economically, politically and militarily, as our authors have made abundantly clear. This creates opportunities but also uncertainties in the region. Among other things China needs to clarify its foreign policy orientation, which has been described—with first more, and now apparently less, enthusiasm—as ‘peaceful rising’ (Suettinger 2004). But it has recently undergone a very significant internal political change, with General Secretary Hu Jintao replacing former President Jiang Zemin as leader of the People’s Liberation Army, and thus finally gathering all the key elements of
power—party, state, and military—into his hands. This peaceful replacement is no substitute for a mechanism of regular political succession, but it seems to have created no internal upheavals. Whether it will mean any changes in China’s policy of regional engagement is so far difficult to predict.

The United States remains a Pacific power, but it has been re-evaluating its troop placements since the ‘war on terror’ began (especially in light of its deficiencies in Iraq and its consequent reliance upon private industry to take on military functions there (Singer 2003)), and that will affect its presence in the Asia-Pacific region. It will alter the balance in the already difficult relationships between China, Japan, and North and South Korea. In August 2004, President George W. Bush announced the withdrawal of troops from Asia, including many from South Korea. Whatever the likelihood of conflict on the Korean peninsula, this action sends a message to the North Koreans that intransigence pays off. North Korea keeps tensions high with posturing over its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, yet it seems genuinely to believe that its measures are defensive.

Australia’s response
Australia confronts a tension in its foreign policy, which this book (and many others) has properly identified, between support for its longstanding ally and friend, the United States, and a critical, independent engagement with its region. Australia has become relatively adept at managing this tension, though there are times when the imperatives of one side (usually the United States) mean that difficult choices must be made. The ‘war on terror’ has offered a number of such occasions, but it takes place against the background of the larger demand by US President George W. Bush that countries declare themselves either ‘for or against’ the United States in this ‘war’.

There is no doubt that a great deal of foreign policy initiative rests with the United States. All the Asia-Pacific states are, in one way or another, reacting to it. Wherever possible, Australia is involved in balancing its US alliance with its other international commitments and interests. Since 9–11, however, Australia has followed the US line very closely, participating in US-led military involvements in Afghanistan in late 2001, and in Iraq in 2003. Australia’s military contribution to the latter may have been small, but symbolically it was large, especially considering the level of international opposition to US military action in Iraq: Australia was demonstrating its solidarity with the United States. But the Australian government has done more in support of the US position. It has criticized multilateral institutions that, in its view, are not working. Australia has closely aligned itself with the American approach to the ‘war on terrorism’, and has reinforced that with a bilateral free-trade agreement with the United States. Owen Harries argues that the current Howard government represents the realist, power-based approach within the traditions of Australian strategic thinking, and consequently its policy has been ‘unhesitating, unqualified and … conspicuous support for the United States in its wars against terrorism and against Iraq’
(Harries 2004, 83–84). This has extended to Australia’s support for US criticisms of multilateralism. The Australian prime minister, John Howard, has even argued for ‘coalitions for action’ outside existing multilateral institutions as one of the most effective ways of countering terrorism and transnational crime (Howard 2003).

Australia has been singled out as a target by transnational terrorists, because of its Western culture and its alliance with the United States. The most recent example was the bomb blast outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta, and although the Bali bombing may have targeted Westerners in general, nearly half of those who died in that blast were Australians. The Australian high commission was also one of the targets of a Jemaah Islamiyah plot in December 2001, foiled by Singaporean security, and JI has made some efforts since the late 1990s to establish contacts, and perhaps cells, in Australia, as testified by convicted terrorist Jack Roche and French terror suspect Willie Brigitte. Osama bin Laden has mentioned Australia explicitly as a target on a number of occasions, both in connection with Australia’s actions in supporting East Timor’s independence and as part of US efforts in Afghanistan. Australia’s response has been to step up its law enforcement and intelligence capabilities at home, and to cooperate in these areas with regional states. Australia has also focused on strengthening governance in regional states, especially Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, as a way of denying bases to terrorists. While sometimes criticized as heavy-handed, Australia’s successes in leading the policing operation in Solomon Islands from mid-2003 and in influencing the Pacific Islands Forum have won over many sceptics.

In the ‘war on terror’, Australia must tread a line between support for the United States and sensitivity to the region. That support was far less difficult to justify in Afghanistan than in Iraq, for the reasoning was clearer and more credible in the former case. But Australia’s participation in the war against Iraq has intensified the regional perception that Australia uncritically accepts US leadership. Regional sensitivities, however, have been even more offended by Australia’s own version of the ‘pre-emptive’ strike doctrine. The Australian prime minister declared in 2002, and has recently repeated—both times for largely domestic political reasons—that Australia would be prepared to send troops to a regional country to stop a terrorist attack that was planned against Australia before such an attack could be launched (ABC 2004). The politics of such a statement has obscured whatever legal conditions or justifications it might have. Regional states have responded with predictable, and doubtless domestically palatable, outrage about the inviolability of their sovereignty. Nevertheless, Australia’s refusal to enter East Timor while it remained a province of Indonesia in 1999, despite clear evidence of a breakdown of order and massive killings, suggests that considerations of sovereignty have considerable weight among Australian policy makers. It should also be noted that Australia’s very close relations with the
United States since 9–11 have not, in fact, made Australia a pariah in the region, which critics of its foreign policy constantly fear.

The challenges of the ‘war on terror’

The overwhelming focus on the ‘war on terror’ has tended to obscure other security issues in the region, and has brought Australia even more closely into the orbit of US foreign policy. But there are a number of other challenges emerging from this ‘war’ that have potentially far-reaching effects. I shall sketch three of them here. The first is that the ‘war on terror’ has reinforced the US tendency (already apparent before 9–11) to unilateral action on the world stage, and has been used to justify poor foreign policy. In rushing to overthrow Iraqi president Saddam Hussein the United States has undermined international law and opened up further opportunities to transnational terrorists. The second challenge is that in pursuing this ‘war’, the West—and especially the United States—is putting at risk what it proclaims so publicly to defend, its open society, and consequently (perhaps in a way that al-Qa’ida never intended or expected) that the United States itself is on trial. The third is that it threatens to degenerate into a ‘clash of civilizations’, at least in so far as it can be presented as a contest between Islam and the West, or Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, and consequently that moderate Islamic states will be pressed to reject liberal democracy as alien and unworthy.

It may seem ironic that the real subject of these challenges is the United States. However, the way the world’s only superpower reacts to the challenges of transnational terrorism is a far more important measure of our global system of power and our regional system of security than the outrages of terrorism. The United States, for all its military and technological superiority, and the wonder of its economy, has signally failed to display the wisdom that ultimately guided its ‘cold’ war against communism in the second half of the twentieth century. We expect nothing from transnational terrorists except a callous disregard for human lives, and contempt for compassion. And we are not disappointed, because that is what we find. The terrorists make demands that cannot be met; they reject negotiation; they are fanatics in the classic mould. But our expectations of US actions are much higher; and we have been disappointed. A different presidential administration—as might be created under the Democrat John Kerry, for example—will probably register little change on this scale. The United States is blind to the fact that technology does not of itself solve social problems. And social problems are at the root of the appeal of transnational terrorism.

How the United States has chosen to pursue the campaign against terrorism, and how far it will be bound by international law, are decisions that have alienated much of world opinion and consequently dissipated the enormous sympathy the United States received in the immediate aftermath of 9–11. Its actions are tainted by the suspicion that they are merely the pursuit of US national interests for strategic and economic advantage under a convenient cover. This suspicion has
been deepened by Richard Clarke’s account of high-level policy conflation of the Iraq and terrorist issues by the Bush administration in, and since, 2001 (Clarke 2004). Whatever the truth, the United States has undoubtedly downgraded the role that multilateral institutions might play in the ‘war on terror’, which it now seems to see as ‘its’ war. Where its assessments differ from those of the United Nations, for example, the United States is clearly prepared to act without the sanction of that body, and in the face of widespread international protest. In early 2003 the United States did not pursue, because it knew it would not receive, a Security Council endorsement of the looming war.

The war in Iraq from 2003 onwards is the clearest indication that the United States is prepared to flout the conventions of multilateralism. But it joins a growing list of international engagements, or agreements, from which the United States has withdrawn. Unilateralism, however, has not completely triumphed. The US foreign policy community is a diverse one, and it contains many critics of the current trend. There are articulate and persuasive voices in the American foreign policy debate against unilateralism, such as Joseph Nye, who insist that the United States cannot ‘go it alone’ (Nye 2002). The trend towards unilateralism is linked to the current prevalence of neo-conservatism in US foreign policy making. On this issue, the views of veteran Australian analyst Owen Harries are worth noting. Harries has argued that the events of 9–11 tipped the balance of forces in the US policy establishment in favour of those advocating change. This resulted in the National Security Strategy (NSS) issued in September 2002 which, among other things, endorsed pre-emptive action.

The challenge now is how the United Nations can be brought back to the centre of international agenda-setting, and how the international norms set by the UN can once again command respect. The UN did not succeed in taking the initiative in defining what the war on terrorism was about; it thus lost any chance of leading the response. The UN is currently addressing the issue of its own relevance by establishing a panel of eminent persons to recommend ways the UN could reform its institutions. In announcing this move, Kofi Annan explained that the UN had reached a ‘fork in the road’ as decisive as that of 1945, when the organization was founded (Annan 2003). Multilateralism is not a cure-all, but it does provide a useful perspective on the ‘war on terror’. Just as this ‘war’ should not be used to stifle legitimate political dissent within states by a loose use of the term ‘terrorism’ to describe political opponents, neither should it be used in the international sphere to justify any actions that the United States takes.

The second challenge in the ‘war on terror’ is that the values of freedom and democracy which transnational terrorism seeks to destroy should not be undermined in the fight to defend them. Restricting civil liberties in liberal democracies in the name of security is therefore a worrying development. In US domestic affairs, the ‘war on terror’ has led to restrictions on civil rights embodied in the ‘Patriot Act’, and the incarceration of suspected enemy combatants inside the US base at Guantanamo Bay but (until recently) outside US legal jurisdiction,
suspension them in a type of legal ‘no man’s land’. The position of moral superiority assumed by the United States over the terrorists has been further diminished by revelations early in 2004 about the humiliation and torture by American guards of Iraqi prisoners held in the Abu Ghraib prison.

And finally, one of the key challenges must be not to let the struggle against transnational terrorism turn into a ‘clash of civilizations’. Such a clash, at least in the manner that Samuel Huntington (1996) first described it, is not inevitable. But conceiving of the ‘war on terror’ as a crusade threatens both to deepen the gap between Islamic and Western nations, and to besmirch the struggle against terrorism with the discredited historical baggage of the Crusades. If this notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’ is allowed to take hold, transnational terrorists will have won one of their most important battles, not by force of arms, but by force of ideas. And those of all religions who favour peace, security and tolerance will have lost.

Responding to transnational terrorism

In surveying the actions that have purportedly been taken in response to transnational terrorism since 9–11, one cannot but feel that—even at this early stage in what promises to be a long struggle—some essential points about the nature and strategy of this terrorism have been missed. Transnational terrorists are the new revolutionaries. They seem largely to have succeeded in persuading people that they are part of one, unified cause, though in my view this is misleading. They have succeeded in encouraging a stronger demand in the West for traditional security—larger armed forces—and newer security technologies, rather than for cross-cultural dialogue and support. But they have not succeeded in getting greater understanding or sympathy for their cause, which is amorphous, and presented largely in terms of the extension of sharia law over Muslim populations. Their Manichean view of the world, pitting ‘us’ against ‘them’, allows no mercy and no concessions to secular or Christian Westerners or to Jews (and has also treated Muslim lives with contempt), and their demands are not ‘political’ in the generally understood sense of incremental changes resulting from negotiation and bargaining. In the most important sense their audience is not among Westerners at all; it is chiefly Muslims they seek to win to their cause. Muslims who, they hope, will rise up against what the terrorists see as corrupted and Western-dominated regimes.

Promoting terrorists to the level of the enemy in a ‘war’, however, gives them undue status, elevates their self-esteem and their notoriety in the eyes of potential supporters, and—in the asymmetrical power struggle that eventuates—turns the dead terrorist into a martyr and his supporters into new recruits. Unfortunately, it also appeals to Western politicians, who crave the popular support of wartime leaders and aspire to be considered ‘statesmen’.
How should one respond to these terrorists? There is no question of making concessions or compromises, for no policy move by any of the major Western countries will make any difference to the visceral antagonism of transnational terrorists. Some of the best measures that can undermine the potential of transnational terrorism to win supporters are connected to extending education and freedoms to Muslim populations, but given US support for oppressive regimes in the Middle East, these are unlikely to be put into effect. The US is stuck on the horns of its own dilemma. On balance, the war in Iraq has been counterproductive, if it were intended to deny a base to terrorism: it has attracted new recruits to terror and damaged the reputation of the United States.

In a larger sense, the US war against Iraq was a blind alley. Driven by its fears of transnational terror, the United States miscalculated both the threat of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the effects of its collapse. Victory on the battlefield in Iraq has turned out to be only the first phase in a much more complicated scenario, which risks degenerating into civil war. In early September 2004, the US death toll in Iraq since the beginning of the war in 2003 passed 1,000. Iraq has become a playground of extremists, including transnational terrorists, nationalists, and opportunist gangsters, with no clear way out. A rapid withdrawal of US forces is likely to worsen the situation, since there is no obvious national leader in Iraq, just a gaggle of regional, religious and ethnic leaders vying for power. And the United Nations is understandably reluctant to take responsibility for clearing up the mess.

US policy in the ‘war on terror’ has been hijacked by neo-conservatives. Instead of trying to remake Iraq in America’s image, the focus should now be on consolidating the new regime in Afghanistan, and ensuring that the Taliban cannot return to power or undermine order. Afghanistan has many problems with its state capacity undermined by powerful warlords, but there is some hope in an elite consensus around President Karzai, and the fact that the United States does not loom as an occupying power. The roles of the United Nations and NATO have been important in assisting regime change in Afghanistan, but promises of desperately-needed support for reconstruction need to be honoured.

Of the two major strategies in the response to transnational terrorism—first, being vigilant about identifying and apprehending terrorists; second, undermining the ability of terrorists to recruit, by addressing the grievances they exploit—only the first has so far been vigorously pursued. Ramesh Thakur has argued that: ‘The basic root cause [of terrorism] is neither religion nor poverty but lack of liberty and freedom … Fanaticism feeds on grievance, and grievance is nurtured by deeply felt injustice … Terror is the weapon of choice by those who resent being historical victims but are too weak to do anything about it through conventional means. The US becomes the focus of grievance if its arms are seen to be propping up brutal and occupying regimes’ (Thakur 2004).
Conclusion
Asia-Pacific security has undoubtedly become more complicated since 9–11. Existing problems have been overlaid with the concerns raised by transnational terrorism, and the threats from terrorist networks that appear to criss-cross the region. Yet terrorism makes the addressing of existing security concerns all the more pressing. And while terrorists might try to enrol all existing problems into their litany of protest against the West, we should be careful to ensure that we do not follow suit. No matter how much we may be tempted to focus on attention-grabbing incidents in international relations generally, and in the campaign of transnational terrorism more specifically, we need to remember that international security will continue to be shaped by a number of slower moving factors: demographic and environmental changes; economics, science and technology; and political systems and the beliefs and values that underlie them.

Though there may be clear military victories here and there, the ultimate victory against transnational terrorism will not be won on a battlefield, it will be won in the minds of Muslims. It will not be won with a decisive blow, but with sustained pressure. This is not a battle between Islam and the West; rather, it is a battle for the soul of Islam itself. It must be fought in the Islamic schools and the mosques. What is really at stake is the spirit of Islam. And however much the West may want to help moderate Muslims, it cannot fight the battle of ideas for them.

More than ever before, the Asia-Pacific region needs to build a stronger sense of regional identity, and cooperate in building a more robust regional security architecture, the foundations for which already exist. For terrorists do not respect national boundaries. The Asia-Pacific may have once been of interest as the place where the interests of great powers intersect, but it may become of even greater interest as the place where the clash between radical Islam and moderate Islam will be decided. For those who appreciate Islam’s humane heritage, and who look to the enormous potential of democratizing Islamic states, our sympathies must lie with moderate Islam.

References


