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Evaluating Our Partners and Allies Five Years Later

Over the past two weeks Americans have been inundated with special reports evaluating the United States' performance in the "Global War on Terrorism" since 9/11. But any examination of how far we have come and what remains to be done must also include a look at our partners and allies. That story—how the world has contributed to America's fight against terror—is an intricate mosaic of missteps, obstacles, accomplishments, heated debates and unpredictable results. While international counter-terrorism cooperation has soared over the last five years, today the global coalition is battered and bruised and in need of repair.

When the United States put out a call for partners following the September 11 attacks, virtually every country responded positively. Nations from every corner of the world offered an array of military, intelligence, economic and political support. Even traditional adversaries such as Libya and Syria contributed. And many of them delivered in the face of significant bureaucratic and cultural barriers at home.

The most remarkable barrier overcome by our allies has been public opinion. Once the Bush administration decided to take the fight to Iraq, public attitudes turned dramatically against the United States, making it difficult for foreign leaders to openly support the American-led war on terror. But despite deep divisions over Iraq, a number of countries—including France and Germany, two of the most outspoken opponents of the Iraq war—maintained strong counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States, albeit often discretely.

Our partners and allies have also overcome a number of legislative hurdles in cooperating with the United States. Despite thorny debates on how to enhance surveillance while maintaining civil liberties, several countries have made significant progress in creating a stronger legal counter-terrorism framework that doesn't put intelligence and law enforcement at odds. Denmark's strong tradition of tolerance and freedom of speech has been narrowed to restrict inflammatory language or instruction to terrorists. British laws for deporting extremists have been relaxed, while restrictions on allowing them in at all have been strengthened. Meanwhile, Canada, the Philippines, Jordan and many other nations have imposed limits on charities that support extremist movements.

Of course, not every partnership has produced positive results. Pakistan's President Musharraf made the decision early on to work with the United States but he has also taken great pains to placate supporters, sometimes resulting in promises of assistance that are heavy on rhetoric and light on substance. Others, whose original promises of support may have been genuine, have found the obstacles to tightening borders, tracking suspects or changing legislation to be

Upcoming Strategy Hour

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The Next Japanese
Administrations
and
Implications for the U.S.-Japan
Alliance

18 September 2006
4CR – 9:00am

Featured speakers:

Nicholas Szechenyi, Fellow and Assistant
Director, Japan Chair

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insurmountable. In some cases, America's comprehensive security posture has proved too resource-intensive for many nations to mimic, even on a smaller scale.

To be sure, not all difficulties in counter-terrorism cooperation can be traced to our partners. In many cases, it has been the United States that has failed to foster long-term and cooperative partnerships. Most damaging has been the decline of U.S. moral authority, stemming first and foremost from the invasion and botched occupation of Iraq, but also from Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and the renditions of terror suspects. The war in Iraq has also eclipsed other aspects of the fight against terror, frustrating our partners' intent on turning U.S. attention to preventing the proliferation of WMD, halting the spread of radicalization and strengthening intelligence sharing.

U.S. partnerships with countries with poor human rights records have left the impression that America will partner with anyone in the name of short-term tactical gains. Its decision, for example, to negotiate the use of Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad airbase to assist with the mission in Afghanistan was sharply criticized given that country's dismal human rights record. Furthermore, some allies have started to question the overarching value of standing arm and arm with the United States when its global image is so tattered. As a result, international cooperation is becoming more difficult, not less.

While there is no shortage of success stories in the international fight against terror, today the global coalition is plagued with mistrust and deep divisions over strategy, threatening its overall effectiveness. Assuming the war on terror will not end soon, the United States should take a number of steps to revitalize the coalition's mission and morale. Future success in the war on terror urgently depends on it.

The United States should begin by promoting a lasting sense of partnership by assuring allies that it won't abandon them once short-term operational needs are met. It should also counter international perceptions that the war on terror is exclusively tied to Iraq by increasing the resources dedicated to non-military means. Closing Guantanamo, the lightning rod of global public opinion, would go a long way towards rebuilding America's image.

Building stronger partnerships will also require the United States to keep decision-making transparent (foreign leaders prefer not to read about new counter-terrorism initiatives in their local papers) and remain realistic about other governments' constraints. We should not, for example, ask a country like Romania to simultaneously deploy troops to Iraq and then reprimand them for failing to modernize their forces fast enough.

Most importantly, the United States needs to build a foundation of international cooperation that goes well beyond the war on terror, one that focuses on the other pressing challenges we face with our allies. Simply put, America needs to listen harder and give more—to get more.

■ *Julianne Smith, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, International Security Program, and Thomas Sanderson, Fellow and Deputy Director, Transnational Threats Project. Original version, electronically published on washingtonpost.com's Think Tank Town, Monday, September 11, 2006.*

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