

The United States and the International Security Agenda Counting the Cost, Ten Years On

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Bin Laden was one of the world's main security concerns over the last 10 years.

Ten years have passed since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States; the events spelled out the international security agenda of the following decade in capital letters. During this period, terrorism was characterized as the principal threat to international security, despite recognition that other scourges—such as natural di-

sasters and epidemics or pandemics, to name just two—proved to be equally damaging to social wellbeing.

The first decade of the twenty-first century also marked a dramatic decline in U.S. hegemony, in part due to the appearance of defenselessness the attacks left in the popular imagination of a country that was the self-proclaimed winner of the Cold War and even “the one indispensable nation.” Ten years on, and despite the fact that in May 2011 the alleged mastermind of the attacks, Osama Bin Laden, was captured and executed by U.S. troops, Washington does not appear to be regaining the upper hand, and in fact has seen its leadership role in the world greatly diminished by the 2008 financial crisis.

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Even now, with attempts by Barack Obama's government to change course, as demonstrated by the announcement that troops based in Afghanistan will be withdrawn by 2014 at the latest, it seems unlikely that this will restore his country to pole position as world leader, particularly given its performance in other countries. Nor does it appear that Washington will give up the use of force since, although it seems likely that terrorism will decline in importance following recent events, a perception exists that organized crime must be dealt with, and drug trafficking in particular, an issue of major importance for Mexico.

THOSE IN DECLINE AND THOSE ON THE RISE

In his book on the decline and fall of the European Union,¹ journalist Richard Youngs considers that this group of nations, whose experience in integration goes back over 50 years, to the Treaty of Rome—or over 60 years, if we count the initiative by Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands to create Benelux in the middle of the World War II—² is in crisis and risks becoming irrelevant if it does not change its strategy. Youngs's analysis is important given the perception that the European Union (EU), long considered a world power to rival even the United States, is currently experiencing one of its worst moments in the new century.

For the United States this should, in principle, be good news, given that it will be some time before Europe can reassert itself and become a strategic rival to Washington. However, the country is facing its own serious leadership problems, apparently related to poor administration of its power resources, but above all to the ascent of *the others*.

Who are *the others*? Generally speaking, they are countries that object to the United States' preeminence as a world power, though it bears mentioning that none of them appears prepared at present to assume the role of world leader, especially given the costs this would entail. These nations include Russia, China, India and Brazil; Japan and the EU also belong on the list, though their recent performance has undermined this. Though these are highly diverse nations, they all possess certain power resources that give them room for maneuver and relative prominence in international relations.

In this scenario, the United States would be called upon to make urgent efforts to change its course, while the rest of the world, and in particular these emerging countries—which are not necessarily the same as the so-called emerging econ-

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omies— would have to make a greater effort to contribute to global governability, though they would inevitably demand recognition from Washington for that contribution.

TERRORISM, SECURITY AND OTHER SCOURGES: WHERE DO THE PRIORITIES LIE?

When the United States characterized terrorism as the greatest threat to its security following the events of September 11, 2001, it was clear that the psychological impact of the attacks inside its territory had been devastating. The country that emerged as the winner at the end of the Cold War—a kind of *globocop* who would ensure security and prosperity for the planet— had been attacked, and the images of the Twin Towers ablaze and then collapsing were significant not only for the human tragedy they entailed, but above all for the *message* they bore. These highly mediatized events fulfilled their purpose: to show that the United States could be vulnerable in its own homeland, and thus, that the country supposedly charged with maintaining security worldwide was not even capable of looking after itself.

U.S. authorities, realizing the significance and impact of the attacks, set about articulating an equally mediatized response that included, among other strategies, circulating the image of the alleged mastermind of the attacks, in order to point the finger at the organization responsible for carrying them out, as well as finding where it was based and who its supporters were. It was in this way that war in Afghanistan, then ruled by the Taliban, who sheltered al-Qaeda cells, became imminent and was initiated a month after the attacks. Osama Bin Laden was placed on the list of the most-wanted men in the world, and most nations showed their solidarity with the U.S., condemning the attacks and closing ranks with Washington in the so-called global war on terrorism. At that moment, terrorism was elevated to the rank of the foremost threat to global security and to that of the United States in particular.

For all that, al-Qaeda's greatest success lies in having succeeded in destroying the United States' credibility and leadership. No doubt this inspired others to follow in their footsteps, meaning al-Qaeda is not the only organization to present a danger of terrorist attacks on U.S. targets.

As such, it would appear that asymmetrical conflicts are to be the hallmark of the twenty-first century, above all while U.S. security forces continue to favor conventional conflict scenarios in the face of the versatility of terrorist and criminal organizations.

If all this had not proved a serious enough challenge to U.S. credibility and leadership, the global economic crisis of 2008, which began there, demonstrated its inability to lead the community of nations down the path of prosperity. The companies and financial institutions responsible for the crisis have failed to pay their dues, and it does not appear that the U.S. or any other government is going to call them to account or punish them for their behavior.

THE DEATH OF BIN LADEN AND THE OTHER TERRORISM

It is important to remember that the terrorist attacks attributed to al-Qaeda under the leadership and guidance of the late Osama Bin Laden never put the survival of the United States as a nation at risk. Certainly it has been the object of attack in the past, especially abroad, though rarely inside its own borders. So, when the airplanes struck, and it was later confirmed the attack came from abroad, the U.S. sought to inflict "exemplary punishment" of the alleged perpetrators with the aim of dissuading others from following their example. Over the past decade it is known that further attacks were planned, but the better preparedness and reinforcement of U.S. security and that of its allies have succeeded in reducing the international terrorist threat.

Nevertheless, the Obama government faces the consequences of the failure to live up to promises made by the George W. Bush administration with regard to its security doctrine. These included destroying al-Qaeda and other

transnational terrorist organizations; transforming Iraq into a prosperous, stable democracy; democratizing the rest of the autocratic regimes in the Middle East; eradicating terrorism as an asymmetrical threat; and ending the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In this regard, the United States needs to reconfigure its security interests in more cogent terms while bearing in mind the limitations of its power.

One of the consequences of placing al-Qaeda at the center of security concerns is the implied assumption in the U.S. and in much of the rest of the world that terrorism is above all a technique used by Islamic fundamentalists. It was forgotten that the United States was the victim of a brutal terrorist attack on April 19, 1995, perpetrated by a U.S. citizen, Timothy McVeigh, a veteran of the first Gulf War and a security guard. He set off a truck-bomb filled with explosives that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma, killing 168 persons and injuring 680 more.

This implies that the global war on terror should not lose sight of the fact that there is an internal level of threat in the United States from anti-government citizens, who are capable of causing serious harm to their fellow Americans. For example, it is often forgotten that following the September 11 terrorist attacks, a series of deliberate attacks using packages of anthrax spores caused the deaths of five people and affected a further 17. In contrast to the speed with which al-Qaeda and Bin Laden were identified as being behind the Twin Towers attacks, there was no such certainty when it came to identifying those responsible for the anthrax attacks. Two suspects, Dr. Stephen Hatfill, recently exonerated, and Bruce Edwards Ivins, who committed suicide before his name was made public, were all the U.S. justice system could come up with. Despite initial attempts to link the anthrax to al-Qaeda, no proof was found, bolstering the hypothesis that it was an action undertaken by anti-government Americans.

The question of internal terrorism by anti-government individuals and/or persons opposed to the government of the day for whatever motive is an important one, if we are to judge by the July 22, 2011, Norway attacks, attributed to an individual linked to the far right, discontented with the incumbent, left-wing government.

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EPILOGUE: THE NEW INTERNATIONAL
SECURITY AGENDA

If September 11 and the subsequent decade provide a lesson for the world, it is that terrorism was neither born nor died in this time frame, nor is it something that can be dealt with using brute force. As such, it is necessary to reassess and improve the work of the intelligence services, since it is they who are in a position to evaluate security threats. Greater cooperation among nations is needed to confront the scourges that present themselves. And, rather than seeking out new enemies and/or threats, a holistic view of the problem is required, in the understanding that terrorism, organized crime, and other challenges tend to be the outgrowth of problems whose root cause lies in the unequal distribution of wealth. Terrorism, when it comes down to it, is only a method, not the problem in itself.

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that, given that both the United States and the world are getting used to living with the terrorist scourge, it will perhaps become necessary to identify new threats to the security of individual nations and the world, due to the requirements of the U.S. military-industrial complex. This makes transnational organized crime a strong candidate to emerge as the leading threat, in place of terrorism.

It is difficult to ignore the fact that in recent decades the use of the term “organized crime” to refer to the ensemble of criminal actions committed by an organization set up for such ends has been broadly disseminated in international treaties, the media, and, of course, among judicial bodies. Some attribute this phenomenon to the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism, as well as to the need on the part of a range of agencies and ministries charged with national security to identify new threats to the post-Cold War order. George Tenet, former head of the CIA, fueled this perception when he asserted in 1997 that the leading threat to U.S. national security in the twenty-first century would be international organized crime. However, the U.S. government did not invest what it needed to in this fight, as shown by the ease with which international organized crime is able to launder money or engage in the illicit arms trade. When we examine the economic, political, cultural, and social impact of organized crime’s activities on societies and the criminals’ intensive and extensive use of globalization networks to achieve their ends, it becomes clear that this is a complex problem demanding intense international collaboration to fight it effectively. Thus, at bottom, it would appear

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that the perception of the international community is that organized crime, especially in the age of globalization, tends to become or is presumed to be a threat to international security, particularly after the capture and death of Osama Bin Laden.

This is an issue of the greatest importance, if we consider the manner in which the United States opened hostilities on Afghanistan with the aim of decimating al-Qaeda and capturing its then-leader, reducing the country to chaos, arrested development, and drug trafficking. If the fight against transnational organized crime were to become the priority of the U.S. security agenda in the world, the affect on Mexico would be of the utmost seriousness. If we add this to the United States’ decline as an economic power, the scenario Mexico is facing is still more complex, considering its enormous dependency on that country in terms of trade, investment, and remittances. Hence, the importance of Mexico looking to other latitudes in the understanding that, while its strategic relationship with the United States will not end, in order to deal with to the scenario of economic and financial crisis there, which will inevitably involve the Mexican economy, it is wise to be prudent and establish genuine alliances with the countries that are on the rise. This, naturally, does not excuse Mexico from insisting in its daily meetings with the United States on the importance of the development agenda to generate security, considering the symbiotic relationship that exists or should exist between the two countries. Given that security of the United States is dependent on that of Mexico, it is in the interest of the former to engage in all initiatives that may contribute to a more stable and prosperous environment. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Richard Youngs, *Europe’s Decline and Fall* (London: Profile Books, 2010).
² Benelux is an acronym formed from the first letters of the names of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. It is mainly used to refer to the Benelux Economic Union, in the context of the European Union. [Editor’s Note.]