

CATO HANDBOOK FOR CONGRESS

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE 108TH CONGRESS

CATO
INSTITUTE

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5. Waging an Effective War

Congress should

- stress to the administration that the joint resolution approved by the Senate and House of Representatives authorized the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001,” not to wage an amorphous war on “evil”;
- urge the administration to focus the war on terrorism only on the al-Qaeda terrorist network and not expand it to other terrorist groups or countries that have not attacked the United States;
- urge the administration to reduce military operations in Afghanistan and expand military operations into the Peshawar border region in Pakistan to root out al-Qaeda and Taliban forces; and
- recognize that much of the war against terrorism will not involve military action but will emphasize diplomatic, intelligence, and law enforcement cooperation with other countries.

The war on terrorism is unlike any other war the United States has waged. The enemy is not a traditional nation-state with armed forces. Instead, it is a dispersed terrorist network operating in more than 60 countries around the world. As demonstrated on September 11, terrorists are unlikely to attack using conventional military means—and they are willing to sacrifice themselves in suicide operations. Also unlike traditional wars, the war on terrorism does not have a geographical front where battle lines are clearly drawn. The terrorists will choose where they will attack (either in the United States or U.S. targets abroad), but the United States may not know where to direct retaliatory action. This war is likely to be long (if the English experience with the Irish Republican Army and

the Israeli experience with Palestinian terrorist groups are any indication). The mere absence of terrorist violence against the United States or U.S. targets overseas will not be a reliable standard for determining if the war is being won. There could be long lulls between terrorist attacks. And there is not likely to be a clearly and easily defined victory—the terrorists will probably not surrender. Realistically, the United States may not be able to win the war in the traditional sense of “winning” and “losing.” Recognizing and accepting that the strategic outcome may be ambiguous can help effective engagement with the enemy.

Focus on al-Qaeda

To begin, the United States must clearly define the terrorist enemy, and in this instance the enemy is the al-Qaeda terrorist network, which is the group responsible for the September 11 attacks against the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. Indeed, the joint resolution of Congress after the attacks authorized the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorists attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.” Therefore, the focus of the war and our efforts must be on al-Qaeda, not a more expansive and nebulous war against terrorism in general. That means avoiding distractions (which use up scarce resources and could potentially lead to getting bogged down) that are tenuous and tangential to al-Qaeda, such as the Abu Sayef in the Philippines and Muslim Chechen rebels in the Republic of Georgia. Both of those are internal problems best left to their respective governments. Similarly, the United States needs to avoid making false linkages between the war on terrorism and the war on drugs by including the Colombian FARC as a target. And the United States must avoid needlessly stirring the hornets’ nest by trying to connect al-Qaeda to other terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which do not focus their attacks against the United States, without clear proof that such groups are collaborating against the United States. It also means understanding that—unless hard evidence proves otherwise—except for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda is not linked to, does not receive support from, and has not been given safe haven by other countries. In other words, the war on terrorism should not be expanded to include military operations against any of the countries of the “axis of evil.”

It is also important to understand that military operations—such as Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan—are likely to be the excep-

tion rather than the rule in the war on terrorism. Intelligence and law enforcement operations will probably be more important to the successful prosecution of the war. Thus, even calling this a “war” on terrorism is somewhat misleading, given traditional thinking about wars and how they are waged.

Afghanistan

Operation Anaconda and subsequent military operations in the wake of Operation Enduring Freedom have demonstrated that only tattered remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda remain in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the U.S. bombing of a wedding party in the Uruzgan province in July 2002 demonstrates that the continued use of airpower for military operations inside Afghanistan may be counterproductive. Therefore, if there is a requirement for “mop-up” operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban inside Afghanistan, the United States should rely more on ground forces—in particular special operations forces.

That said, given the post-Taliban political maneuvering by various regional and local actors in Afghanistan, the United States needs to be extremely careful and wary about intelligence received from Afghan sources about al-Qaeda and Taliban in hiding. There is evidence to suggest that ulterior motives may have been behind intelligence information that prompted several U.S. military actions against the wrong targets or the killing of innocent civilians in Afghanistan. The U.S. military can ill afford too many of those episodes. The biggest mistake the United States can make in Afghanistan is to have the Afghan people view the U.S. military presence as an invading and occupying military force rather than the force that liberated them from oppressive Taliban rule. History shows that while the various factions inside Afghanistan often fight among themselves, they tend to unite against any invading power.

The other “traps” that U.S. military forces need to avoid in Afghanistan are peacekeeping and nation building. Both are nonessential to the successful prosecution of the war on terrorism. The United States needs to recognize that domestic opposition to the Karzai government does not automatically mean the opponents are al-Qaeda or Taliban supporters who are a threat to the United States. Furthermore, the U.S. military should not be used (or be perceived) to prop up the Karzai government. That government must be able to sustain itself on its own merits. That the Karzai government might fall does not necessarily mean the return of Taliban rule and a safe haven for al-Qaeda. Rather, the country would likely revert to its traditional

form of governance—a highly decentralized system with a nominal national government and most power held by tribal leaders and so-called regional warlords. That may not be either efficient or democratic by Western standards, but U.S. interests in the war on terrorism demand only that whatever government is in power in Afghanistan not provide safe haven and support for al-Qaeda terrorists. That the United States is serious and willing to take all necessary action to realize this objective is certainly the single most important lesson learned by the Afghans from Operation Enduring Freedom.

Pakistan

Ultimately, Afghanistan becomes less important as a place to conduct military operations in the war on terrorism and more important as a place from which to launch military operations. And those operations should be directed across the border into neighboring Pakistan, which is where al-Qaeda and the Taliban are known to have fled.

Such operations will not be easy. The lessons learned in Afghanistan suggest that the United States should expect to have to rely more heavily on ground forces to find, engage, and destroy al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. In other words, military victories in Pakistan will not be won with airpower and precision-guided munitions, which means that U.S. forces are likely to experience casualties. Given that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have apparently found shelter in the western Pakistan border area, U.S. military forces cannot reasonably expect support from the population in the region. Indeed, in some instances, the inhabitants may put up fierce resistance. And because of the political situation in Pakistan, the United States cannot count on significant support from Pakistan's army and other military forces. President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan is conducting a high-wire balancing act that will make it difficult enough for him to condone U.S. military action inside his country, let alone actively participate in such action. But if Pakistan is to claim to be an ally of the United States in the war on terrorism, the United States must prevail and persuade Musharraf to allow the U.S. military to expand operations in Pakistan to finish the job it started in Afghanistan.

Weak States

It is apparent that weak states are potential breeding grounds and hiding places for terrorists. Therefore, the Middle East and Africa are areas that

require careful attention. Certainly, the United States must be prepared to use military force when and where necessary. But first and foremost, the United States should work to convince the governments of countries that are likely to be hiding places and bases of reconstitution for al-Qaeda—for example, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen—to take action themselves. Only if such countries refuse or are unable to take action against a significant al-Qaeda presence should the United States consider conducting military operations (in all likelihood with special forces) to hunt down and capture or kill al-Qaeda members.

Saudi Arabia

The United States also needs to put political and diplomatic pressure on friendly Arab countries to cooperate and assist with hunting down al-Qaeda inside their borders. Most notably, 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the September 11 attacks against the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were Saudi nationals. Yet—as was the case after the 1996 bomb attack on the Khobar Towers in Dhahran that killed 19 Americans—the Saudi government has been less than cooperative and remains reluctant to take any meaningful action against potential terrorists. Given the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia (at the request of the House of Saud and itself a contributing factor to making the United States a target for terrorism), such behavior is unacceptable. Just as President Musharraf must ultimately be convinced to give the U.S. military freedom of action in western Pakistan if he is to continue to claim to be an ally in the war on terrorism, the Saudis must also cooperate. If they don't, the United States should sever its ties with the House of Saud.

Indonesia

Another area of the world that bears watching is Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population and is just emerging from years of political, social, and economic turmoil. Various claims have been made about an al-Qaeda presence, including terrorist training camps, in Indonesia. Therefore, the United States needs to determine carefully whether there is a direct al-Qaeda presence in Indonesia or the situation involves an indigenous insurgency with tenuous and tangential links to al-Qaeda (in the Philippines, for example). The mere presence of radical Muslims does not necessarily signify a direct threat from al-Qaeda. And if a stable, democratic government in Indonesia is crucial to preventing future terror-

ism, the United States needs to be careful about placing undue strains on Indonesia's fledging democracy. The presence of U.S. troops in the country, for example, could fuel the anger of Muslim extremists. As is the case with Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen, the United States needs to coax and cajole the Indonesian government to take necessary actions and precautions. But use of U.S. military force should be resorted to only if there is direct evidence of a significant al-Qaeda presence and all other options for dealing with the threat have been exhausted.

Allies and Friendly Countries

The rest of the war on terrorism will be waged against al-Qaeda cells operating in countries that are either allies of or friendly to the United States. The task will be to ferret out and capture al-Qaeda members. The war will not be military in nature. Rather, it will be the hard (and sometimes mundane) work of intelligence and law enforcement agencies. That will require unprecedented cooperation between such U.S. agencies and those in foreign countries. (Cooperation should be limited to intelligence and law enforcement; the U.S. military should not become involved in fighting other nations' wars for them.) The United States needs to improve relations with foreign intelligence agencies in order to be able to share information about suspected al-Qaeda operatives. Foreign law enforcement and internal security agencies will have primary responsibility for apprehending suspected al-Qaeda terrorists. And the hurdles of extradition will have to be overcome so that foreign governments hand over the terrorists who are caught. Again, the United States will need to exert political and diplomatic skill to elicit such cooperation. The threat of military force (let alone its actual use) is not a viable option.

In the final analysis, the United States will not be able to go it alone in the war on terrorism. The United States will need to convince other countries to take actions that are in U.S. interests. Diplomacy and statecraft may ultimately be the most important tools for achieving success against al-Qaeda.

Suggested Readings

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