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All over the place

By Huma Yusuf

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THIS week will mark the eighth anniversary of 9/11. Almost a decade into the global war against terror, only one thing is clear: no one really knows what they're doing. The fight against terrorism continues to be amorphous, peppered with ill-defined successes and failures.

It also promises to be further prolonged and, possibly, irresolvable. Events from last week are a reminder that even on the most fundamental questions of how and where to effectively stem terrorism, world leaders and security experts continue to lack strategy and consensus.

Some days ago, America's top commander in Afghanistan, Gen Stanley McChrystal, proposed a new strategy that is said to call for more troops on the ground, better intelligence-gathering, intense training for Afghan security forces and improved coordination on development projects. McChrystal's call for overall capacity-building comes on the heels of the Afghan polls which the US made every effort to ensure were secure and fair in the hope of strengthening the country's political process.

Meanwhile, to revive public support for the British mission in Afghanistan – which has slumped as the number of foreign troop fatalities rises – Prime Minister Gordon Brown asserted that Britain would not 'walk away' from Afghanistan to the jeopardy of national security, adding that 'a safer Britain requires a safer Afghanistan'. Brown, too, alluded to the importance of state-building in Afghanistan when he said that British troops would only return to the UK when 'Afghans are doing the job themselves'.

In their supposedly 'new' strategies and 'new' commitments to sorting out affairs in Afghanistan, both McChrystal and Brown are leaning on a hackneyed 'war-against-terror' presumption that the only way to eradicate global terrorism is to build state institutions (local government, police force, schools and roads) in failed/failing states and the ungoverned regions within viable states.

The belief that national security and nation-building are interconnected is a throwback to the Clinton administration, which justified US intervention in places like Kosovo and Haiti by arguing that more democratic state institutions would result in heightened global security. The logic then, as now, was that 'ungoverned' areas breed security risks because they are inhabited by potential recruits, provide environments where training camps can proliferate, offer lawless swathes from which terror attacks could be launched and are conducive to illegal financing and trafficking. Combating the lack of government administration, then, became the preferred way to combat terrorism.

In 2004, the US institutionalised the belief that nation-building and national security were intrinsically linked when Congress authorised funding to create the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation (CRS). The CRS was meant to operate in vulnerable, 'ungoverned' territories to help countries make choices about establishing political systems, ensuring security, and even determining 'the very social fabric of a nation'.

The 2004 Congress resolution was driven by none other than Pakistan's old friend Senator Richard Lugar and co-sponsored by then Senator Joseph Biden. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Obama administration – and its allies in the UK – continues to cling to the rhetoric of capacity-building even after ambitions to strengthen nationhood in Iraq and Afghanistan became hallmarks of George W. Bush's failures in the war against terror.

Over the years, though, the connection between nation-building and national security has been widely debunked. In a 2006 policy review titled Failed States and Flawed Logic, analysts at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based research foundation, argued, 'other conditions, such as the presence of terrorist cells' or other factors 'within a failed state' threaten global security. 'It is not the 'failure' that threatens.' The analysis called for decoupling security concerns and nation-building efforts, stating that the best way to counter terrorism would be to target terrorists who were as easily found in Germany, Canada and Belgium as they were in Afghanistan, Sudan and Pakistan's tribal belt.

Other analysts have pointed out that well-governed states are as vulnerable to terrorism as failed states because terrorists too need infrastructure such as banks, a local economy through which to derive or funnel finances, roads and communications networks. Indeed, many have reasoned that cohesive states are the best places from which to launch a terrorist attack.

Writing in The Huffington Post, Malou Innocent points out that strong governments are less tolerant of outside interference and intelligence activities, making terrorist activity harder to detect and monitor. Conversely, ungoverned regions are open game for covert ops and blatant attacks and are thus, in Gary Dempsey's words, 'defenceless positions'. Think about it: the frequent drone attacks in Fata and Afghanistan would not be possible in a London suburb.

The realisation that terror breeds equally in governed and ungoverned spaces is implicit in initiatives such as Operation Pathway – the crackdown this April by British authorities on 12 Pakistani students suspected of plotting a terror attack. And yet, despite fervent activity to quash terror on its own soil, Britain continues to predicate its national security on a 'safer' Afghanistan.

The West's confusion about whether to harness nation-building as a way to boost security (which in itself issues from muddled thinking on whether poor governance results in terrorism) is just a small example of the confusion endemic in global policy decisions regarding counterterrorism. Almost a decade into the long war, this basic confusion has spread from the Pentagon to Pakistan.

In recent weeks, Islamabad has been on high alert owing to the threat of internal terrorist attacks – indeed, the government apparently had intelligence that elements might target the religious affairs minister Hamid Saeed Kazmi. Late last month, security forces foiled three terror ploys within 48 hours, of which the most significant was the arrest of seven Lashkar-i-Jhangvi activists in Karachi. Recently, Lahore, Peshawar, Sargodha, Quetta and other developed and relatively well-governed parts of Pakistan have also emerged as the targets – and dwelling places – of terrorists.

Yet, like the West, Pakistan clings to the stereotype that terrorists are creatures that thrive in ungoverned spaces. Recently, army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani swore to keep up the fight in Malakand until the last militant was eliminated. But he made no mention of Pakistan's urban centres, which are as vulnerable as the tribal belt to militant attacks. Without clearer thinking from all quarters on how to combat terrorism and identify terror suspects wherever they might be, the war against terror will drag on well into the next decade.

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