Security and Security Studies after September 11:  
Some Preliminary Reflections

Amitav Acharya

Abstract:

Debates about the meaning of security and the agenda of security studies have entered a new stage following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US. This paper explores some of the main themes and likely directions in this debate. It identifies five issues: (1) the new threat of, and the new warfare against, terrorism; (2) US strategic primacy and its impact on international stability; (3) implications for “clash of civilizations” thesis; (4) implications for the relationship between democracy and international security, and (5) the shift from “human security” to “homeland security”.

The paper argues that the new threat of transnational terrorism and international responses to it has undermined both “clash of civilizations” and “end of history” perspectives, which together formed one of the great debates in international security studies in the post-Cold War era. The new security debate in the post September 11 era should be about the role of US in a unipolar world (especially whether and how it can be stabilizing), and the rise of the “homeland security” paradigm, which entails a reassertion of state power over societal forces and blurs the distinction between Western and Third World security paradigms.

Introduction

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on 11 September 2001 and the US counterstrike against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, are clearly among the most important geopolitical events of our times. Like past such momentous events in history, September 11 will have considerable impact on the concept and practice of security. In this brief paper, I deal with the implications of September 11 with a view to offer some preliminary suggestions as to how it might affect debates about what security means and how best to achieve it. The discussion falls into five broad areas:

- The new threat of, and the new warfare against, terrorism
- US strategic primacy and its impact on international stability
- Implications for “clash of civilizations” thesis
- The relationship between domestic political systems and international security
- The shift from “human security” to “homeland security”

I. The New Threat and the New Warfare
Security in its barest essence involves reducing vulnerability to threats. More than any previous episode, the September 11 attacks have demonstrated the vulnerability of nations to the new danger of *transnational* and *post-modern* terrorism. While terrorism is not a stranger to security studies discourse, a good deal of security studies scholars are now going to focus on defining the nature and dimensions of this “threat”.

One of the most succinct descriptions of the shape and magnitude of this danger came from Singapore Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo, in the following words:

> The new terrorism is of a different genre. Like in a civil war, the threat is harder to pinpoint because it is within. Families may be split with the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ mixed together. It is globalised by the same technologies which created the global economy. It does not consist of guerillas sheltering in the countryside making occasional incursions into the cities, but operates and draws strengths in multi-ethnic and multi-religious urban environments. It makes use of air travel and the internet. It uses similar encryption algorithms to hide its internal communications. Worst of all, its members are prepared to die for their cause.²

By striking at the heart of US economic and military power, the September 11 attacks became a defining moment of international relations. They ended forever America’s sense of relative invulnerability to foreign non-nuclear attacks. While terrorists had targeted American lives and assets before, few had expected attacks of such magnitude to succeed on American soil.

While underscoring the vulnerability of the US to the terrorist threat, September 11 also paved the way for the US to demonstrate its overwhelming dominance of the global military balance. The lessons of the Afghanistan war is likely to take up a good deal of the attention of strategic analysts.

Before it started, many experts had opined that the war against Taliban could not be won and should not be fought. How could the US win a war in which the target was so elusive and unidentifiable? Didn’t Afghanistan have a history of humiliating foreign powers?

Yet Afghanistan offered a resounding demonstration of the “new American way of war”. This way of war relies on three key instruments. The first is weapon systems that can be deployed at extremely long ranges. The second is the capacity of such weapons to hit targets with extreme precision. Third and most important, is the ability of US forces to process and use an immense amount of targeting information collected on the ground, in the air and from space.³

In this type of warfighting, airpower, backed by target-spotting special forces, surveillance aircraft and imaging satellites with electronic systems and sensors able to peer through darkness and clouds, play a decisive role.⁴ This new American Way of War is also thoroughly “smart”. In the 1991 Gulf War only 10 percent of the bombs were precision-guided, meaning they could sense and hit targets from a laser beam or pick up signals from a Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite. In the Afghan War, 90 percent
of the bombs were thus capable. The main precision-guided weapon in the Gulf War was a cruise missile costing US$1 million apiece. In Afghanistan, the main weapon of the air war was a kit, called Joint Direct Attack Munition, which could make dumb bombs smart by attaching a GPS and tail fins to guide a bomb 16 kilometers from the aircraft to the target. It came at a cost of US$18,000.5

Caution is warranted in drawing lessons about the US military prowess from the Afghan experience. Afghanistan had no forest cover, and the Taliban had no air defence. Its demise would mostly have been less swift but for the ruthless ground campaign of the Northern Alliance. The US might not enjoy these advantages in other theatres of conflict, such as in East Asia, where Singapore’s security interests are more directly engaged.

The American military reach is accompanied by its expanding sphere of strategic interest. September 11 prompts a rethink of the relative strategic importance of regional theatres for US grand strategy. While the importance of the Middle East as part of America’s sphere of vital interests is expectedly confirmed, South Asia now would have a higher profile in US grand strategy than was the case for some time. Moreover, American strategic engagement in Southeast Asia has been strengthened.

II. Unipolarity with Unilateralism

Security studies scholars have long debated how the distribution of power in the international system affects the prospects for peace and stability. During the Cold War, many scholars challenged Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realist doctrine that bipolar systems (as during the Cold War) are likely to be more stable than multipolar systems (as during the 19th century). This proposition could not, however, be put to test when the Cold War was ended, since the post-Cold War Era actually turned out to be a “unipolar moment”, which has now consolidated into a unipolar era. The more recent debates about balance of power have thus been about the consequences of American strategic primacy for global order.

September 11 may provide some ammunition to those who believe that a unipolar world order is conducive to international peace and stability. For example, renewed American strategic engagement in Southeast Asia to counter terrorism would be viewed by many regional governments, if not their peoples generally, as a positive force for regional stability. American hegemony has been strengthened so much so that it now acts as a significant check on regional conflicts. For example, by consolidating its influence over both India and Pakistan, America has acquired an unprecedented ability to restrain their rivalry, one of the most dangerous flashpoints in Asia and the world.

In the past, hegemony did not prevent the US from acting multilaterally. It was a victorious United States after World War II which presided over a prolific era of multilateral institution-building (including the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions). This became the basis of the theory of “hegemonic stability” which conceptualised how a hegemon could promote global order by accepting sacrifices and offering public good in vital areas (such as free trade and security). But the positive linkage between hegemony
and multilateral cooperation may be challenged in the post-September 11 world. This is evident from the US attitude towards coalition-building during the Afghanistan war. Dashing initial hopes and calls for a renewed commitment to multilateralism, George W. Bush did not replicate the “New World Order” approach that his father had employed against Saddam Hussein in 1990. Instead of collective security, the US invoked the right of national self-defence under the UN charter to bypass direct Security Council authorization for the conduct of the military campaign. Learning from Kosovo where alliance warfare had proven cumbersome, the US also shunned NATO’s direct involvement, although the alliance had invoked its collective defence provision for the first time in history in support of the US.

While the international community was generally supportive of the US position, each of America’s key regional allies have demanded and secured something in return for their backing for the US. (In contrast to the situation during the Gulf War of 1991, when the US got its allies, Japan and Germany in particular, to pay for most of the war costs). China and Russia were quick to press for an American understanding that domestic insurgencies should be viewed as a terrorist, rather than human rights issue. India secured American backing for its own war against terrorism involving Pakistani-supported Kashmir militants.

Those who argue that a unipolar global power structure is not necessarily conducive to stable great power relations will find it particularly interesting to examine trends in great power relations since September 11. The war produced a nominal improvement in great power relations. But here too seeds of discord were already evident. The warmth in US-Russian relations sparked by Putin’s sympathy and support for the US did not prevent a mad dash to Afghanistan by Russian troops soon after its liberation from the Taliban. The terrorist attacks diverted attention from Sino-US tensions, eased by China’s support, albeit qualified, for the US anti-terrorist campaign. But China’s sense of military vulnerability in the Taiwan Straits could only be aggravated by the awesome display of US power projection in Afghanistan. Beijing could not have been happy with the haste with which the Japanese government pushed through legislation to enable its navy (in a supporting role) to enter the waters of the Indian Ocean for the first time since the Second World War. In Europe, while British and West European support for the US was predictably forthcoming, the Blair government probably surprised itself with its exceptionally strong backing of the Bush Administration.

The war in Afghanistan has several implications for the theory of alliances. First, a new catalyst of alliance-formation has clearly emerged. Alliances are usually formed against common threats. Throughout the world, transnational terrorist networks are filling in as the common threat against which states can build new networks of security cooperation. While no new formal alliance is forthcoming in Southeast Asia, the terrorist threat in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines has already produced the first multilateral gathering of their defence intelligence chiefs.

At the same time, September 11 might have a dampening impact on alliances. It served to highlight the growing gulf in military technology between the US and its European allies,
which could be matched by a political gulf over the Palestinian problem and the proposed US attack on Iraq. The US technological superiority makes for unequal alliances, making strategic interoperability in Europe and East Asia between US and allied forces especially difficult. This might be a worthy subject for scholars of alliances investigating why alliances decline and transform.

III. Culture Clash: Between or Within?

In the 1990s, Samuel Huntington’s thesis regarding an impending clash of civilizations had a major impact on the agenda of security studies by generating much new attention on cultural and identity as sources of conflict. It also became a major point of contention. The September 11 attacks and the international reaction offer a good test of the thesis, and how it fared will be long debated by security studies specialists and policymakers around the world.

Writing in the *Newsweek* magazine, Samuel Huntington argues that “[R]eactions to September 11 and the American response were strictly along civilization lines.” But the evidence coming from Asia suggests otherwise, at least where government responses were concerned. While, as Huntington observes, the governments and peoples of Western countries were “overwhelmingly supportive” of the US, and made commitments to join its war on terrorism, it was the governments of India and Pakistan, which were among the first to offer military facilities to the US. Pakistan, a Muslim nation, which proved to be the most critical link in the logistics chain that ensured victory for the US against the Taliban.

Governments, including those presiding over Islamic nations, not only condemned the terrorist attacks on the US, many also recognized its right to retaliate against Taliban. Governments in Muslim Central Asia braved popular backlash by offering material and logistical assistance to the US. From Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, from Iran to Indonesia, Islamic nations distanced themselves from the theology of Osama-bin-Laden. Musharaf denounced his homegrown extremists for giving Islam a bad name and for threatening the modernist vision of Pakistan’s founder, Ali Jina. Iran, having for decades spearheaded the Islamic revolutionaries’s jihad against the “great Satan”, made no secret of its disdain of Taliban’s Islamic credentials.

In responding to September 11, states acted more as states than as civilizations. From Hindu India to Muslim Indonesia, from Buddhist Thailand to Catholic Philippines, the response of governments was the same. Asked to chose between the US and the terrorists, they overwhelmingly sided with Washington. They did so despite reservations about the US support for Israel, concerns about civilian casualties in the Afghanistan war, and misgivings about US military and economic dominance of the world. And they chose this course despite the Bush administration’s decision to give short shrift to multilateralism and coalition-building.

Why governments acted this way speaks more to pragmatism and principle than to their cultural predisposition and civilizational affinity. National interest, regime security, and
modern principles of international conduct were placed ahead of primordial sentiment and religious identity. Pakistan, for example, got badly needed American aid and de facto recognition of its military regime. Indonesia, whose support as the world’s most populous Islamic nation was crucial to the legitimacy of the US anti-terrorist campaign, received both economic and political support for its fledgling democracy. The Saudi regime, which along with Pakistan had created the Taliban, simply followed the dictates of its security dependence on the US. Iran saw an opportunity to rid itself of an unfriendly regime in its neighborhood and extend its influence beyond its eastern frontiers.

For some governments, concerns for domestic stability and regime security proved decisive. In rejecting the open call to Jihad issued by the Taliban and its supporters, some Islamic nations acted out of interest, others out of principle, but most out of a combination of both. Many nations recognized the US counter-strike as an exercise in a nation’s right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter. They would not grant the same right to the Taliban, whose apologists had portrayed terrorism as a legitimate weapon of the weak against an unjust, anti-Islamic, and overwhelmingly powerful imperialist. A combination of national interest and common interest remains the basis of international relations. Religion and civilization do not replace pragmatism, interest and principle as the guiding motives of international relations.

Finally, the clash of civilizations thesis has been challenged in the wake of September 11 by those who view the terrorist attacks and the response of the international community as signifying a clash within a civilization (Islam). This view perhaps has greater merit. Not only did governments of the world close ranks against the threat of transnational terrorism. Domestic cohesion in multi-ethnic countries (such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) has also stood up to the challenge. All this might not be sufficient to drown out traditional geopolitical rivalry between, or cultural conflict within, nations. But the international response to September 11 should go some way in discrediting the clash of civilizations thesis.

Adherents to the clash within a civilization thesis could draw support from the divergent perception of, and reactions to, September 11, on the part of governments and peoples. Throughout the Islamic world, including Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia, societies showed less sympathy and support for the US than did their own governments. And a lot of this popular anger is directed against their own governments, especially those who had sided with the US or had not been sufficiently forthcoming in condemning the US military action in Afghanistan. Popular resentment of American support for Israel made it difficult, though not impossible, for their governments to show understanding and support for the US. President Megawati of Indonesia made a much publicised visit to the White House to show solidarity with the US. But domestic disapproval of this stance soon forced her to criticise the US attack on Afghanistan. Domestic pressures also explain why Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, after making it difficult for his own citizens to travel to Afghanistan to fight with the Taliban, also attacked the US military campaign in Afghanistan. The war against terror is thus more divisive when it comes to the relationship between governments and their subjects than that between governments.
iv. Retreat From History? Democratization and International Security

Before September 11, the literature on international relations and security studies had seen an acrimonious debate over the relationship between domestic political systems and international peace and stability. On the one side were the proponents of the liberal “democratic peace” theory, which argues that democracies seldom go to war are more expansively that democracies are generally more pacific than autocracies). Critics had argued that democratization could actually engender greater conflict and regional disorder. Both the “democratic peace” proponents and their “voting to violence” detractors are being tested by the fallout of September 11.

The new debate over the relationship between democracy and democratization on the one hand conflict and security on the other is actually about two questions; whether lack of democracy is a “root cause” of terrorism, and whether democracy limits the ability of states to effectively respond to it.

On the first question, Anwar Ibrahim, the deposed and jailed Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, was quick to observe: “Osama bin-Laden and his protégés are the children of desperation; they come from countries where political struggle through peaceful means is futile. In many Muslim countries, political dissent is simply illegal.” Anwar’s thesis is supported by an important fact about the perpetrators of September 11: they were inspired as much by a hatred of their own governments as of American hegemony. Osama bin Laden’s turn to full-blown mass terrorism was sparked by his well-known dislike of America but also of the autocratic ways of the Saudi royal family. Mohammed Atta, the apparent ring-leader of the September 11 terrorists, has been described by his German friends as having spoken with “increasing bitterness about what he saw as the autocratic government of President Hosni Mubarak and the small coterie of former army officers and rich Egyptians gathered around Mr Mubarak.” Anti-Americanism of the kind that breeds the bin-Ladens of the world goes hand in hand with authoritarianism in the Middle East, where governments routinely permit their media to fuel anti-American sentiments so as to deflect attention from their own repressive rule. In this sense, America’s war on terrorism, as Ellen Amster reminds us, is in reality one in which Washington is interposing in a fight between Islamic radicals and Arab governments.

If the absence of democracy breeds terrorism, does democracy preempt and defeat the terrorist challenge? Some advocates of democracy in the Muslim world hope that “With more democracy… and a stronger voice for advocates of democracy, popular frustrations are less likely to be misdirected, and the resort to violence and terror reduced, particularly among an increasingly disaffected and vulnerable young population.” In Southeast Asia, Surin Pitswuan, a former Foreign Minister of Thailand who is a Muslim and who has been a leading voice for democracy in Southeast Asia, argues that democracy reduces the danger of terrorism by enhances the conditions for inter-ethnic harmony in plural societies. “As we pursue our aspirations of democracy”, he contends, “we know that we shall be free to practise our faith fully and on an equal basis with others who also have their own religious faith and rituals sacred to them.”
As the cases of US, Israel and India demonstrate, democratic governance does not make a country immune to transnational terrorism. Thomas Homer-Dixon argues that the advanced industrial nations of the West are uniquely vulnerable to terrorism because of their growing complexity and interconnectedness, and their tendency to concentrate vital infrastructure in small geographic clusters. The fact that these nations also tend to be democracies is not inconsequential, since democracies are also theoretically restricted in their ability to conduct the kind of arbitrary detention and coercive investigation needed to prevent acts of terrorism.

But in supposedly “mature” democracies, such restrictions may be withering, as governments wake up to the dangers caused by traditional pitfalls of civil liberties in combating terror. This was demonstrated for example by the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, a French national, whose laptop computer presumably with information about the impending September 11 attacks could not be legally seized by the US authorities in time to save the World Trade Center. Ironically, it is the immature new democracies, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, which may now be more vulnerable to terrorism because of their inability to imitate Ashcroft’s America.

Moreover, September 11 has shown that democratization might undermine the ability of newly democratic governments to counter the menace. Indonesia’s inability to replicate the efforts of its neighbours, Malaysia and Singapore, in suppressing suspected terrorists has been blamed on democratization. After repealing the notorious Anti-Subversion Law of the Suharto era, Indonesia under its new democratic constitution does not provide for an Internal Security Act similar to those of its two neighbours.

These questions and challenges to democracy after September 11 calls for a reassessment of the “End of History” thesis proposed by Francis Fukuyama after the end of the Cold War. Fukuyama had argued that the end of the Cold War has settled once and for all the great clashes of ideas which historically served as powerful drivers of human history. Democracy and free markets have triumphed over all other alternatives, including centrally-planned economies ad Marxist-Leninist political systems. September 11 is a setback not just for Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis, but also for the Fukuyama perspective of democracy and free market as the endpoints of history. The war against terror now takes precedence over civil liberties in the West (with American Attorney General praising Malaysia’s Internal Security Act), the principle of self-determination in the developing world (where governments are now able to present demands for autonomy as another manifestation of the terror network), and the championing of human rights and democracy by the West (witness Pakistan, where the West’s great hero of the war against terror has also turned out to be the great anti-hero of the pro-democracy cause). The retreat of freedom is paralleled by the reassertion of state power over the forces of free market. With a vengeance, states everywhere are striking back and re-powering themselves against the forces of globalization. They are doing so in a variety of ways, by regulating financial flows with a view to curb the economic lifeline of terrorist networks, tightening immigration controls, and remilitarizing borders. What we are witnessing therefore is not the “end of history”, but a “retreat from history”.

v. From “Human Security” to “Homeland Security”

As discussed by Professor Smith in his overview of security studies, before September 11, the security agenda of nations was reorienting towards “non-conventional” issues: e.g. environment, refugees, migration and abuse of human rights, etc. The paradigm of human security, or security for the people, had emerged as an alternative to national security, or security for states (and in real terms, regimes). But the distinction between national security and regime security, always tenuous, will now be further blurred. Transnational terrorism may well be classified as a non-conventional threat, but responding this menace is very much spearheaded by conventional configurations of states. And states are now reasserting themselves against societal forces.

The human security agenda is undermined by the renewed conflation between state security and regime security in the developing world. By creating a sense of national unity and purpose, however brief and superficial, the war against terrorism, like any wars, presents governments with an opportunity to out-maneuver their political opponents. Furthermore, terrorism has become a convenient and overarching label under which governments and academic analysts, in the West as much as in the developing world, could lump any and all kinds of challenges to state authority and regime security. Self-determination, the much vaunted norm of the post-Cold War global political order, is sidelined in this altered political and intellectual climate.

Thus, while showing empathy for the US after September 11, Chinese official commentators have expected American understanding of China’s own brush with “terrorism and separatism” in Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. Months before September 11, the Shanghai Forum, a regional grouping of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, had issued a joint declaration of its defence ministers pledging “real interaction of the armed forces and other power structures of their countries in the fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.” To be sure, terrorism and self-determination are not always separable. But in the absence of a common understanding of what terrorism means, governments can be expected to conflate terrorism and separatism to crush legitimate demands for self-determination, even the terror-free variety. Where terrorist acts are carried out in the name of self-determination, governments now have less reason to separate the tactics from the cause.

The post-September 11 world order has implications for the campaign to promote human rights, one of the key ingredients of the human security paradigm. An America which carries out secret detentions of legal and illegal aliens suspected of terrorism and imposes a blanket denial of Geneva convention rights on its Afghan prisoners in Cuba, loses its moral high ground as an advocate for human rights and democracy in the world. This message is unlikely to be lost on governments elsewhere, especially those who have accused the US of double standards when it comes to promoting human rights and democracy. They would feel even less constrained (if they ever were) in challenging the universality of human rights norms, especially when their domestic stability is at stake. This compounds another possible consequence of September 11, the decreased
space for civil society, as discoveries are made of how some terrorist organizations thrived by claiming NGO status and adopting their modus operandi.

Security is changing in another, and more fundamentally ironic, manner. The “traditional division of security threats into external and internal threats,” declared Defence Minister Tony Tan of Singapore in the aftermath of September 11, “no longer held”. The American model of “homeland security” is finding roots in Singapore and in other parts of Asia and the world. Though ostensibly geared to defeating the terrorist menace, homeland security is also a highly elastic notion that could be made to cover all aspects of fighting “low-intensity” threats and controlling day-to-day lives. Going by the thinking of America’s leading experts on future wars, the real heroes in the coming war on terrorism would not be the “Daisy-cutters” and “Predators” of Afghanistan, but the “pervasive sensors” found in America and its fellow-traveling nations, sensors which could be “attached to every appliance in your house, and to every vending machine on every street corner, and which would then register “your presence in every restaurant and department store.”

In projecting the growing sense of insecurity within America, homeland security blurs the once fashionable distinction between Western and Third World security approaches, in which the latter focused on their domestic front while the former pursued defence against foreign military aggression. With Americans on American soil made to feel and act more insecure than their counterparts in India or Indonesia, the home front against terrorism has brought America’s security predicament closer to that of the Third World. As both situations converge, it is well to remember the words of David Ignatius, “But security is different. Like life itself, it is something for which people will pay almost any price.”

Conclusion

The paper shows that the new threat of transnational terrorism and international responses to it has undermined both “clash of civilizations” and “end of history” perspectives, which together formed one of the great debates in international security studies in the post-Cold War era. The new security debate in the post September 11 era should be about the role of US in a unipolar world (especially whether and how it can be stabilizing), and the rise of the “homeland security” paradigm, which entails a reassertion of state power over societal forces and blurs the distinction between Western and Third World security paradigms.

NOTES


The Afghanistan campaign involved the first effective use of remotely piloted surveillance aircraft (“Predators”) which could beam back video pictures in real time showing enemy movements and pinpoint targets. This enabled US to hit even small elusive targets with smart bombs and guided weapons.

Ricks, “High-Tech Successes”, op.cit. Equipped with precision-guided heavy bombs that rely on all-weather targeting by satellites, US B-52s were able to destroy targets with a single payload, which would have normally required several runs. With these and other assets (including laser designators to guide smart bombs), a few hundred US troops on the ground could pinpoint targets accurately enough with a small number of bombers flying from aircraft carriers 1000 miles away or from Diego Garcia located even further away. The use of “daisy-cutters”, huge 680-kg bombs that set off fuel explosions to ignite all the oxygen in an area of the size of several football fields, symbolized the massive firepower of the US boosted the morale of the local allies and destroyed Taliban’s hiding areas in remote mountain caves. Joseph Fitchett, “Campaign Proves the Length of U.S. Military Arm”, International Herald Tribune, 19 November 2001.


Neil MacFarquhar, “In Cairo, Father Defends Son as Too ‘Decent’ to be Jijacker”, International Herald Tribune, 20 September 2001, p.3


Ibid.