
Chapter 5

**Towards a Socio-Economic
Struggle Against Violent Extremism**

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Introduction

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 caused the United States (U. S) to reprioritize its strategic interests in the world. Almost overnight the war on terrorism jumped to the top of the list. The 9/11 attacks were a wake-up call to defend the U.S. homeland. Beyond the homeland, the main front for this war on terrorism quickly became Southwest Asia. The United States attacked Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Prior to 9/11, the most important U.S. strategic interest in SE Asia was arguably America's shared prosperity with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) states.¹ But since 9/11, U.S. leaders began to see the region in a different light. Admiral Thomas Fargo, the former PACOM Commander, refers to Southeast Asia as a "primary fault line" in the war on terrorism. Other observers in the U.S. see SE Asia as a "second front" in the war on terrorism. If so, what is the nature of this second front? In particular, what is the military dimension? The metaphor of a war against terrorism accurately describes the effort to capture or kill terrorists in Afghanistan. The language of war also helps to evoke a national mobilization. But the conflict in Afghanistan gives the false impression that the war against terrorism is a conventional war. In fact, Afghanistan was an exception.

What makes this terrorist threat so difficult to tackle is its multi-dimensional nature. After Afghanistan, the scope for conventional military action in places like SE Asia is quite limited. Admittedly, the military does play a role in the U.S. war on terrorism in Southeast Asia. But any success in reducing terrorism in Southeast Asia demands the use of all the elements of national power—diplomacy, intelligence, law enforcement, economic policy, foreign aid, public diplomacy and homeland defense as well as military power. The

¹ For more on these subjects see the following forthcoming publication: Leif Rosenberger, *Asia Pacific Economic Update 2005*, US Pacific Command, Camp Smith, Hawaii, USA.

U.S. government is well aware of the need for interagency cooperation. But in practice, U.S. interagency operations in the war on terrorism are difficult to implement.

Missing: Strategy

Another crucial gap in American policy is absence of a comprehensive long-term strategy to counter terrorism, according to the bipartisan 9/11 Commission Report released in June 2004. The report says that what the U.S. needs first and foremost is a grand strategy. In fact, the bulk of the 9/11 recommendations call for a broad political and economic strategy. Of the 27 recommendations in chapter 12 on developing a global strategy, only one can be seen as advocating the use of military force: attacking terrorists and their sanctuaries. And even this one requires multilateral cooperation cited earlier.

Recently, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and other top officials from the Bush Administration have changed the way they talk about terrorism to be more consistent with the vision of the 9/11 Commission Report. They have shifted their strategic communication terminology from a narrow “war against terrorism” to “a struggle against violent extremism” (SAVE). The administration is making the change because the war on terrorism focused too much on terrorism as a tactic. In this regard, Philip Zelikow, special assistant to Secretary of State Rice, is leading the effort at the head of a 10-member U. S. committee that is expected to lead to a formal declaration of a new U. S. national strategy. How do we go from new semantics to a new strategy?

Crafting a Strategy

Crafting a strategy requires three components: ends, ways and means. The ends or what is wanted (a reduction in violent extremism) is straightforward. The means (the financial resources needed) is conceptually straightforward once the ways are established. But what makes strategy formulation difficult is coming up with ways. How do we reduce violent extremism? What strategic concepts are needed? The answer to these questions is difficult because they require creative thinking. Creative thinking is prevalent in the

U. S. business sector. But the 9/11 report is critical of U.S. government analysts for their lack of imagination. Former Singapore Prime Minister Goh has criticized the people in Singapore for their rigid mindsets. In fact, he initiated a “remaking Singapore” program to instill more creativity and innovation in the people in Singapore.

Most analysts of violent extremism start with two reasonable assumptions: a) law enforcement plays a central role in combating violent extremism, and b) violent extremism must be treated as a crime. If so, how should SE Asian police forces reduce violent extremism? Interestingly enough, three members of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) are currently working with analysts at the Institute for Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) in Singapore. What can the NYPD police teach IDSS analysts about violent extremism?

Back in the late 1980s, the crime rate in New York was among the highest in the country. Then in the 1990s, Rudi Giuliani became the mayor. Mayor Giuliani changed the philosophy of policing in New York. Before Giuliani New York City had reactive policing. A crime would take place. The dispatcher back in headquarters would call a police officer in his car. The police officer would drive to the scene of the crime. The people in the area would flee, always fearful that the police might arrest them if they were nearby. Police officers would be rewarded based on their number of arrests and convictions.

Protecting the People

Giuliani changed all this. He took police officers out of their cars. He sharply increased the number of cops on the beat. By walking the beat, NYPD police bonded with the people. People in the neighborhood now viewed the police differently. The police were there to protect them from crime. The people would alert the police to any strange developments. That pro-active public awareness and two-way communications helped to prevent crimes from taking place.

As a result, the number of crimes taking place in New York City fell dramatically. It also reduced fear of crime. New York became one of the

safest cities in the United States. That boosted confidence and the people reclaimed their parks, playgrounds and streets. People started shopping again in Manhattan. The economy took off. This same creative approach to reducing crime could arguably be used to dramatically reduce violent extremism in places like southern Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Turning Enemies into Friends

In strategy formulation, the U.S. also needs to differentiate between hard-core violent extremists and those individuals who would abandon the cause if given a viable alternative. During the 1980s, the U.S. did not have to capture or kill all the communists to “win” the Cold War. Instead President Ronald Reagan persuaded many communists that democracy and the free market were better than communism. The lesson learned in the Cold War ideological struggle is that people can and do change. President Ronald Reagan turned enemies (like Gorbachev) into friends. Similarly, the Chinese communists became capitalists in all but name.

President Bush says the U.S. will not bargain or negotiate with Al Qaeda. The U.S. position is that there is no common ground or basis for dialogue with Al Qaeda. But there is always a danger that the U.S. makes the mistake of coloring a moderate Moslem group that criticizes U. S. policy with the same brush that it uses to track down violent Moslem extremists. So the U.S. needs to sort out hard-core terrorists who should be captured and brought to justice from those it seeks to win over.

Defending U.S. Ideals

The 9/11 Report also argues that the U.S. needs to defend its ideals vigorously, even when US friends or allies do not respect these ideals. Why? Another U.S. Cold War lesson is the following:

“Short term gains from cooperating with the most repressive and brutal governments were too often outweighed by long-term setbacks for America’s stature and interests.”²

² The 9/11 Commission Report (henceforth 9/11 Report) Recommendation # 6, 376.

A good Cold War case study in this regard occurred in El Salvador. The U.S. kept sending guns to the military in El Salvador to kill Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) insurgents. Poorly trained right wing “Death Squads” would use these guns to kill innocent victims as well as communist terrorists. More and more innocent victims joined the FMLN insurgency and the number of violent extremists rose. After awhile a stalemate was reached. The one-dimensional U.S. military approach to violent extremism failed. The rigid U.S. mindset finally changed, which in turn led to progress in ending this bloody conflict in which both sides were guilty of terrorism and other atrocities. The U.S. learned that the FMLN insurgents had some just grievances. The U.S. changed its role from military sponsor to that of an honest broker with the United Nations (UN). The Death Squads and FMLN insurgents were brought together in the same room.

The ability to forgive and forget didn’t happen overnight. But step-by-step, the combatants gradually but steadily moved toward reconciliation. At first, there was anger and demands for revenge. Then, came a full accounting of the truth about atrocities on both sides. Next, came the punishment phase. Only after there was a sense of justice was it possible for the anger and demands for revenge to start to fade. The society then moved towards opportunity and hope. The final phase is reconciliation, as in Cambodia today.

Toward a Coalition Strategy

Next, the U.S. strategy must be transformed into a coalition strategy.³ The U.S. cannot fight terrorism alone. Practically every aspect of U.S. activities against violent extremism in SE Asia relies on international cooperation.⁴ Without close multilateral cooperation, there are simply too many nooks and crannies for violent extremists to exploit.

But a coalition doesn’t mean everyone has to “jump onboard” and do it the American way. Open policy debate on violent extremism should be fostered, not discouraged. The policy debate among U.S. friends and allies does not undermine U. S. ideals. It enhances them. One of the most important U.S. freedoms is freedom of speech. The 9/11 Commission’s Report lauds respect

³ See 9/11 Report, Recommendation # 10, 379.

⁴ See 9/11 Report, 379.

for the rule of law, openness in discussing differences and tolerance for opposing points of view.”⁵ In this regard, the Senate Intelligence Committee reviewed the Central Intelligence Agency’s pre-war intelligence failure on both weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi operational support for Al Qaeda. The committee blamed groupthink for creating false threats.⁶

Policy Differences

Thankfully, groupthink was not a problem at the Shangri-La Dialogue of Defense Ministers in Singapore in June of 2004. Some Asian leaders at the Shangri-La meetings said that the U.S. was tackling the war on terrorism in the wrong way, radicalizing Asia’s Moslems and failing to appreciate the growing domestic opposition to the U. S. policies that are weighing on Asian allies.⁷ A few days earlier Malaysia’s new Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi—a former moderate Islamic teacher—blamed the Israeli-Palestinian problem and U.S. policies in Iraq for radicalizing even more people, breeding a new generation of violent extremists, refusing to recognize some root causes of terrorism and consciously and deliberately aggravating the problem.⁸ Abdullah speaks from experience. He successfully used a subtle approach to defeat the Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS) in two states by addressing grievances (such as corruption in the ruling United Malays National Organization [UMNO]) and not inflaming passions. Armed terrorists were captured without deaths on either side. In so doing, Abdullah avoided the pitfalls of the right wing death squads in El Salvador who kept creating new violent extremists.

Policy Consequences

The 9/11 Report says that America’s policy choices have consequences: “Rightly or wrongly, it is simply a fact that American policy regarding

⁵ 9/11 Report, 376.

⁶ See US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Report on the US Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, 2004.

⁷ Far Eastern Economic Review, (henceforth FEER), “Same Planet, Different World,” 17 June 2004.

⁸ Ibid.

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq are dominant staples of popular commentary across the Arab and Moslem world.”⁹

Former Singapore Prime Minister Goh concurs and says that increasing numbers of moderate Muslims around the world are uncomfortable with America’s Middle East policies and therefore can’t justify joining the wider fight against violent extremism. Like Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah, Goh argues that a more balanced and nuanced U. S. approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must become a central pillar of the struggle against violent extremism.¹⁰

Resentment

Notwithstanding the critique of ASEAN states, the United States is heavily engaged in the Middle East and the broader Moslem world and will be for years to come. The 9/11 Report persuasively argues that this U. S. engagement is resented.¹¹

- Polls in 2002 found that among America’s friends, like Egypt—the recipient of more U.S. aid for the past 20 years than any other Moslem country—only 15% of the population had a favorable view of the United States.
- In Saudi Arabia the number was 12%. And two thirds of those surveyed in 2003 in countries from Indonesia to Turkey (a NATO ally) were very or somewhat fearful that the United States may attack them.”¹²

Since the U. S. invasion of Iraq, support for the United States has plummeted even outside the Middle East. Polls taken in Islamic countries after 9/11 suggested that many or most people thought the United States was doing the right thing in its fight against violent extremism. Few people saw popular support for Al Qaeda. Half of those surveyed said that ordinary people had a favorable view of the United States. By 2003, polls showed that the bottom

⁹ 9/11 report, 376.

¹⁰ FEER, 17 June 2004.

¹¹ See 9/11 Report, pp. 362 and 375.

¹² Ibid.

has fallen out of support for America in most of the Moslem world. Negative views of the United States among Moslems, which had been largely limited to countries in the Middle East, have spread.

- Since the summer of 2003 favorable ratings for the United States have fallen from 61% to 15% in Indonesia and from 71% to 38% among Moslems in Nigeria.¹³

Which groups should the United States target in trying to win hearts and minds? For starters, the small number of Moslems who are fully committed to Usama Bin Laden's version of Islam are currently impervious to persuasion. But the United States could attract the large majority of Arabs with what Harvard's Joseph Nye calls a soft power message that encourages reform, freedom, democracy and opportunity. That said, as long as Americans are the carriers of this message, these messages are of limited effectiveness. The 9/11 Commission's Report persuasively argues that the United States can promote moderation but cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Moslems can do this.

Toward Opportunity and Hope

How can the United States be more effective in reducing anti-Americanism? Perhaps U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage puts it best: "Americans have been exporting our fears and our anger, not our vision of opportunity and hope."¹⁴ The United States and its ASEAN partners need to foster economic opportunity and hope for a better life if the war on terrorism is to achieve anything but tactical successes.¹⁵

Educational opportunity is also essential to winning the struggle against violent extremism. The UN correctly equates literacy to freedom to develop one's potential. Education also teaches tolerance, the dignity and value of each individual, and respect for different beliefs as a key element in any global strategy to eliminate Islamist terrorism.¹⁶ President Bush talks about his about his education program, "No Child Left Behind" in the United

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 9/11 Report, 377.

¹⁵ See 9/11 Report, Recommendation # 9, 379.

States. This same philosophy should be spread globally to help reduce the root causes of violent extremism.

Breeding Ground

Some people are quick to make the case that poverty and illiteracy do not cause violent extremism. They also say that lots of terrorists come from relatively well-off families. In addition, they point to parts of Africa where there is widespread poverty and no violent extremism. True enough. But it doesn't take much radical leadership and organization to exploit poverty and illiteracy, use the United States as an ideological scapegoat and ignite anti-U.S. violent extremism in the Middle East. After all, 40% of adult Arabs are illiterate. One third of the broader Middle East lives on less than two dollars a day. The same social and economic injustice that fans incendiary conditions for violent extremism in the Middle East can and does occur in ASEAN states. The 9/11 Commission's Report persuasively argues that "When people lose hope, when societies break down, when countries fragment, the breeding grounds for terrorism are created... Backward economic policies and repressive political regimes slip into societies that are without hope, where ambition and passions have no constructive outlet."¹⁷

Underclass

Meanwhile, the Asian underclass is not remaining passive in the face of poverty and illiteracy. Poor people are rising up and venting their frustration. The underclass was a key political driver when the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party was voted out in India. A similar political event happened in Mongolia. Despite strong economic growth in both places, the incumbent government was voted out. The good news is that this was all done peacefully.

But when there's no peaceful way to vent, the potential for terrorism to break out increases. Elections come and go but the needs of the underclass are ignored. As a result, terrorism breaks out in places like Nepal, Indonesia, southern Thailand and parts of the Philippines. Pervasive poverty in Laos

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 9/11 Report, 378.

and Cambodia also create the potential for violent extremism unless the governments can provide a better way of life for the underclass.

Thailand's Southern Insurgency

The outbreak of Islamist violence in Thailand's Moslem south is particularly disturbing since this separatist militancy has not been seen since the 1970s and 1980s. Thai authorities initially played down over 100 killings since January 2004. But they are not dismissing it anymore. Anxious Buddhists are buying guns and training for battle. In one sense the conflict is a religious struggle that pits Moslem insurgents against a Buddhist dominated government. The militant Moslems want to restore the independence of Pattani, a region that was annexed by the Buddhist kingdom of Siam a century ago.

But in another sense the previously dormant conflict has found fresh partisans among those religiously fervent Moslem youth that lack jobs, hope and opportunity. Moslem teachers tell them Buddhists are responsible for hopelessness and their only hope for a better life is a "Jihad for Pattani." Bangkok cannot change this mindset simply by killing Moslems. If Bangkok wants to persuade Moslem youth to rediscover their loyalty to Thailand, Thai authorities need to offer an attractive alternative. Bangkok needs to provide a viable economic development package and new jobs.

Conclusion

Creating macroeconomic growth and prosperity for a privileged few is not enough. Prosperity is like a pile of horse manure. It must be spread around as fertilizer before things grow. In this regard, it's important to understand that strong economic growth is not an end in itself. Economic growth is a means to generate employment, banish poverty, hunger, and homelessness and improve the standard of living of all the people. To sum up, spreading prosperity, while not a silver bullet, does help in combating violent extremism. Conversely, poverty and illiteracy are easy prey for violent extremists to exploit.

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