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Terrorism, COIN, and National Security

by Francisco José Moreno

As a reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the United States invaded Afghanistan to kill or capture Osama bin Laden and to destroy his organization. The pursuit of bin Laden and Al Qaeda soon became a battle against the Taliban and as time passed the original mission receded into the background.

The Taliban lost control of the government, but it did not wither away. As the search for terrorists in Afghanistan turned into an all-out war against the Taliban, the 9/11 connection became increasingly difficult to retain. New reasons for staying in Afghanistan were then offered. In March 2003 the U.S. undertook the invasion of Iraq. While the new explanations for the Afghanistan war had been a stretch, the attack on Iraq obeyed no discernible logic and the attempts to justify it were mere fabrications. Despite the repugnant character of his regime, Saddam Hussein had no involvement with 9/11 and, as far as anyone has been able to show, posed no threat to any vital American interest.

The balance sheet of American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq is not a positive one. After nine years of effort Osama bin Laden is still at large, we have become ensnared in a partnership with an unpopular and corrupt government, and the Taliban has gained new strength. In Iraq, with more than 4,000 US servicemen dead and over 30,000 wounded, the American intervention can hardly be considered a success. Internally the country is far from stable. Elections are held but no government can be put together, violence is on the upswing, and it is anyone's guess what will happen when US troops leave—if they ever do. In the meantime none of the country's internal problems have been solved, some have been aggravated and the influence of neighboring Iran has grown. The economic cost of these actions has been astronomical. The \$1 trillion and counting suggested by the Congressional Research Service cannot be too far off the mark. All of this comes at a time when the nation is in a deep recession, struggling under high unemployment and a runaway budget deficit.

With the military following theories strong on lucubration but of debatable effectiveness, a President unwilling to question the decisions and policies responsible for the present situation, members of Congress concerned primarily with posturing, and a press unwilling to undertake a full, in-depth review of our present military commitments and their implications, confusion prevails.

Two major vices contribute to the confusion. First, the laxity and inconsistency with which we employ terms. Second, the prevalence of ideas that range from the turbid to the inane. These two vices are so prevalent that the reasoning used to support arguments seldom precedes, but usually follows, the offered conclusions.

Any serious attempt to examine the impact on our national security of the fight against terrorism and of our military actions overseas must avoid these two vices. When discussing vital issues we must explain what we mean by the words we use and then adhere consistently to those explanations. We must also, explicitly and unambiguously, connect what we assume to what we conclude. Any exposition not following these basic rules of communication—clarity, consistency and cogency— regardless how popular the ideas presented and how exalted their presenters, is nothing but blather

The explanations of what we mean must be simple and straightforward. Important issues are seldom uncomplicated and this is the very reason why the bare bones of one's reasoning must be open for inspection if a dialogue, as opposed to the recitation of opinions, is to take place. The purpose of spelling out the meaning of one's words is not to negate the complexity of what is being discussed, but to make the discussion fruitful by holding the feet of the discussants to the fire of intelligible reasoning.

The more important the subject, the greater the need to follow these principles; however, in order to follow them we must be more interested in understanding than in having our opinions prevail.

In that spirit the meaning of three frequently used terms must be clarified.

- **National Security:** This is the protection of the lives and wellbeing of the country's citizens from attacks by foreign entities, their allies or their agents. How this is done depends on specific circumstances and should be permanently open to reconsideration so needed adjustments can be expeditiously made. Detecting actual dangers and preventing them from materializing is the first responsibility of the security agencies. In protecting national security, hypothetical constructs cannot replace confirmable facts. Pursuing theoretical detours and uncorroborated threats are bound to be detrimental to the protection of the nation.
- **Terrorism:** This is violent action or actions aimed at provoking fear among a group or a population. An act of terror can be undertaken by a psychologically unbalanced person with no purpose other than to create havoc; or it can be undertaken as part of a plan to achieve an objective that goes beyond the violent act itself. In the former case such an act constitutes its own end; in the latter it is a tactic.
- **Insurgency:** This is a sustained attack on a government and its armed protectors with the intention of overthrowing it or forcing changes upon it. These attacks can occur in the countryside, in the cities, or in both; and depending on existing circumstances, they can take the form of regular military confrontation and/or of guerrilla warfare.

With these clarifications in place, let's try to answer some questions.

Is terrorism a threat to American national security, and if so, what is the most effective way to fight it?

The threat presented by terrorist actions to the national security of a country is directly related to the damage, material and psychological, such actions can do.

Sporadic acts of terror, while causing disruption and anger, present little danger to the national security of an institutionally stable and psychologically strong nation. To put in jeopardy the national security of such a nation, terrorists would have to do truly extraordinary things. They would either have to operate unabated for such a prolonged time as to undermine public trust in leaders and institutions, or employ devices capable of producing widespread and sustained panic.

Because of the means and tactics terrorists employ, police methods, procedures and techniques are the most effective ways of detecting and preventing their attacks.

Military institutions in open, western-style democracies are ill equipped to deal with terrorism. Their principal task is to defend their country from a declared enemy with traditional weapons -- as opposed to most authoritarian regimes, where a key role of the military is to control its own citizenry and serve essentially as a national constabulary. In democratic nations—and very especially in the United States given its leadership position and multiplicity of commitments—assigning police functions to the military cannot but be detrimental to its primary function.

Turning the American armed forces into an anti-terrorist organization brings with it a double disadvantage: the basic task of the military is undercut by the diversion of personnel, resources and training; and the effectiveness of anti-terrorist measures is impaired by assigning responsibility for it to an institution ill-fitted for the job.

Structurally and strategically terrorism is closer to traditional criminal activity than to military operations; hence, a police force is much better equipped to successfully detect and prevent it than the military. It is not by chance that the most effective anti-terrorist organization in the United States is part of the New York City Police Department.

What have US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan done to protect American national security?

Nothing in the case of Iraq.

In Afghanistan—after losing track of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda and getting bogged down in a counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban—nothing either.

As reprehensible as its ideas and behavior appear to us, the Taliban, of itself, presents no threat to American national security. And if the Taliban were to re-emerge as sponsor of terrorism at some future time, the United States would have a number of options available to deal with it more effectively, and far less costly, than trying to take a whole country over and remake it to our specifications.

Unfortunately, the understandable anger provoked by 9/11 has not been tempered by rational analysis, but it has been permitted to run amok and take over military and political thinking. As we know of old, anger is not the wisest of counselors.

Is a counterinsurgency-oriented military an asset or a liability to American national security?

The counterinsurgency scheme that goes by the COIN acronym has been so forcefully embraced in recent times by the US military that it has become its guiding intellectual light and organizational principle. In Iraq, however, the virulence of the insurgency was tamed not by

COIN techniques but by money—one of the oldest and least sophisticated methods of dealing with rebels; and the stated objective of bringing about political stability to the country was never achieved. In Afghanistan the evidence is also mounting that the COIN principles formally proposed in 2006 by Generals David H. Petraeus and James N. Mattis simply don't live up to their billing.

The failure of COIN is not just a technical mishap, but an error in judgment with implications for the safety of America. The U.S. military has been putting national security assets in the wrong baskets. All military establishments, regardless of how rich and powerful their country, operate with finite resources, and deviations from their primary task cannot help but negatively affect their ability to perform their basic functions

What constitutes effective national security preparedness?

- 1- Being able to identify threats and repel attacks.
- 2- Being able to accurately gauge the probability and magnitude of threats—how likely they are to materialize and the amount of damage they can produce.
- 3- Apportioning defensive means in accordance with the assessed dangers.

Without underestimating the harm terrorist actions can cause, there are menaces to American national security far greater than terrorism—if not in immediacy, definitely in magnitude.

As long as there is a number one country there are others who will want to replace it. It is the natural—or the historically sanctioned, if one prefers—course of events.

A number one country can be in peril by the power, cunning and aggressiveness of a challenger or by self-inflicted wounds. But whatever the reasons, when a leading country shows signs of weakness an invitation is being extended to potential challengers to move in

Pursuing national security phantoms in Iraq and Afghanistan, getting involved in never-ending conflicts, exhausting the patience and goodwill of allies, wearing thin military resources and even thinner economic ones, can only be detrimental to American national security.

In accommodating fantasies, the United States has ignored or assigned fewer resources to real threats: the increasing assertiveness of China; the still worrisome Russian nuclear arsenal; the mounting weaknesses of the American economy and its energy dependency; the need for effective cyber-war protection; the ineffective and never-ending war on drugs now bringing Mexico to the edge of collapse; the volatile Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Were the Taliban to gain full control of Afghanistan that, of itself, would present no threat to American national security, but the Islamic radicalization of that country would present a clear and direct threat to China. The westernmost Chinese province of Xinjiang is key to that country's mineral and energy riches, its population is primarily Uighur Moslem and it has shown increasing signs of unrest—and the Chinese government has shown increasing signs of concern.

Whatever the rhetoric, the theories, the convoluted explanations and the justifications thrown around, some of the consequences of our actions are obvious. We have squandered valuable human and economic resources, we have inflated the regional power of Iran and we are protecting the national security of China.

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