



Some Random Thoughts on the Summit on Terrorism and Democracy in Madrid, March 9-11, 2005

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The recent *Cumbre Internacional sobre Democracia, Terrorismo y Seguridad* in Madrid was notable for what was included and generally agreed on and what was left out. Not surprisingly, there was no objection to the notion that there should be a zero tolerance for terrorism. It was also repeatedly affirmed-- from President José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero, U.N. Secretary, General Kofi Annan, and other keynote speakers to session panelists-- that poverty, political alienation and social malaise did not cause or excuse terrorist acts. On the other hand, this view was always tempered by the notion that these conditions still had to be understood as long-term contributory factors in the rise of modern terrorist activity.

Regarding the role of political reform, the link between democracy and halting the spread of terrorism seemed an acceptable assumption to many. If not exactly an antidote to terrorism, they agreed that democratic politics plays a role in curtailing terrorism. As President Rodríguez Zapatero put it in his major address, "democracy is the defeat of terrorism."

However, dissenters countered that democracy may be overrated as a deterrent to terrorism; in fact, a shift to democratic politics may open up a Pandora's box of violence (the cases of Russia and former Yugoslavia come to mind). Former National security Council member, Robert Malley, declared that it was an error to think that the existence of democracy means terrorism is on the wane. "Democracy and terrorism can progress hand in hand." He added "if the U.S. wants to be effective in fighting terrorism and promoting democracy, it needs to overcome its image of being a self-interested hegemon focused on protecting Israel's interests." Shlomo Ben Ami agreed that "...democracy is no panacea... in the case of Israel, for example, it didn't ensure that the negotiating process with the Palestinians would be any easier."

But there was a curious omission in the discussions. Toward the end of the second session I became aware that none of the experts on the phenomenon of terrorism or

officials involved in counterterrorism had mentioned the central pillar of the U.S. response to terrorism: war-- especially preventive war. Moreover, none had even mentioned the need for military action such as targeted strikes against states which might have links with terrorists groups as critical to the effort to prevent terrorist attacks. The experts were discussing intelligence, police work, international cooperation, and understanding underlying contributory factors like poverty, political alienation, social fragmentation, psychological and psycho-cultural indicators. The exchanges appeared as an implicit refutation of Washington's approach to terrorism.

This is not to say that the panelists gave no weight to a military response under some circumstances, but no one advanced the notion promoted by the Bush administration-- even as a debating point-- that preventive wars, or the war and current military occupation in Iraq, was an adequate response to terrorism. There was a continual and overwhelming emphasis on human and technological intelligence--over military retaliation. Of course, later there were moments in the conference when the war in Iraq or the so-called Bush Doctrine of Preventive Wars came up, but only in the context of criticizing the concept as a failed foreign policy. The war in Iraq, as the prime example of the U.S. response to terrorism and the attacks of 9-11, was never defended or mentioned in the context of terrorism prevention. One might ask, is the U.S. so out of step with the rest of the world (and many of its own counterterrorism experts that it continues to fight a war on terrorism with an approach that is not even considered as a topic at a conference on the subject?

The U.S. emphasis on a military response to terrorism flows from the original, and lingering, assumption among top officials in the Bush administration that terrorism must ultimately be linked to a political regime. According to this thinking, the true enemies are states supporting or harboring terrorist groups; even the stateless Al Queda network supposedly could not exist without support of states and their populations. This thinking exists as an anachronistic holdover from the Cold War, and was in part responsible for the policy blunders and omissions which enhanced U.S. vulnerability to the attacks of September 11. This conceptual terrain is also muddied by the circumstance that, to the degree that states are involved, they include allies like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Even Washington, perhaps unwittingly, has endorsed the view of the conference delegates. In the recommendations of the 9-11 commission last year and congressional discussions of what might have been done to prevent the attacks, conclusions revolved around what intelligence or processing of intelligence might have made a difference, not what military action could the U.S. have taken that would have eliminated or reduced the threat. While the deployment of thousands of troops and a high tech air force to conduct a "shock and awe" campaign sends a dramatic and intimidating message to evil-doers everywhere, experts at the Summit time and again stressed plodding and mundane police work in the prevention of terrorism.

Unfortunately, there was little substantive discussion of the importance of terminology. The Bush administration has distorted its anti-terrorist campaign employing the clarion call of a "war on terrorism," a phrase ultimately as credible as a

"war on violence." In the first place, "war" was a bad choice of words because it smacks of crusade against Islam (also because "Islamic" is understood and implicit as preceding "terrorism" in the phrase and fuels the propaganda of Islamic extremists). Its mere utterance implies that the campaign against terrorism can be won completely and definitively. The phrase has helped seduce public opinion into supporting a military campaign in Iraq in the name of changing a regime linked-- falsely the world now knows-- to terrorism. Of course, the U.S. was able to capture the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in the name of fighting terrorism just as the allies took Berlin in 1945 to defeat Fascism. Yet unlike the allied victory in World War II, the fall of Baghdad and the military occupation of Iraq not only did not curtail terrorism; it has fostered it.

The conference never produced a useful working definition of the term "terrorism." The UN has defined terrorism as "any act, besides those specified and in force in the conventions and agreements on particular aspects of terrorism, the Geneva accords, and Resolution 1566 (December 1, 2004) of the National Security Council of the U.N., which is aimed at causing death or grave physical harm to a civilian non-combatant, when the purpose of said act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population or oblige a government or an international organization to take an action or refrain from one." The conference, for example did not address the issue of making the term all-inclusive for political reasons.

Terrorism, by definition, is NOT an attack on a military target even by suicide bombers. Yet the U.S. military and the media still refer to attacks on U.S. soldiers as acts of terrorism. As recently as Wednesday, March 16 George Bush praised those Iraqis engaged in defeating terrorists, casting all armed opposition in Iraq into the same criminal category. (See [El Pais](#) "Los Estadounidenses critican la guerra...", 17 march 2005, p. 3) We recall that Japanese Kamikazi pilots were not considered terrorists but rather fanatical members of the enemy's airforce. U.S. soldiers who disregarded their own lives to attack the enemy in virtually suicidal missions were considered heroes, not terrorists. Terrorism as the U.N. definition underscores, is conducted against civilians; armies are trained not to become terrorized but innocent civilians may be terrorized in ways that are deemed useful to the persons responsible for terrorist acts. Moreover, any definition of the term, should include the use of tactics by armies and states which directly or indirectly terrorize the population. What, after all, was the U.S. assault on Baghdad in March and April of 2003 but a military campaign designed to sow terror and therefore discourage the Iraqi people--military and civilian-- from resisting? Code-naming it "Shock and Awe" highlighted its terrorizing intent.

There was, however, general agreement that a counterterrorism effort did not include a blank check to abandon international law or the accepted conventions protecting human rights. Ken Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, argued that since September 11 many states have utilized the threat of terrorism as an excuse for trampling on human rights. How can we convince terrorist groups, he asked, to stop violating humanitarian laws by killing civilians when governments engage in this practice?"

Today, the banner of moral values under which the U.S. responded to terrorism after September 11 lies stained and tattered in the wake of the revelations last May of torture at the Abu Graib prison in Baghdad. To this scandal added more evidence of torture and abuse at the military facility in Guantánamo, Cuba and Afghanistan, and now the recent revelations that U.S. authorities have "outsourced" torture to other countries, placing the program under the bureaucratic euphemism, "extraordinary rendition." This is appalling hypocrisy from an administration which cloaks its foreign policy in the rhetoric of moral imperatives and which many believe has just won re-election in large part because of its perceived defense of moral values. Could this have inspired President Rodríguez Zapatero when he ended with this thought: "Ladies and Gentlemen: to banish hypocrisy is fundamental to triumph in the struggle against terror?" And shouldn't we include torture and human rights abuses, whether committed by rogue groups, political parties or states, in our as yet inchoate and evolving definition of terrorism?