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Perspectives

Axis of Evil



Surprise, surprise. America's allies are in a flap over George W. Bush's actually naming three terrorist states. In his State of The Union address, the President said that "the United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." Then he did the unthinkable—he specifically named Iran, Iraq and North Korea and called them an axis of evil.

Newspaper editorials in Canada, Australia and, more so, Europe, deplore such presidential behavior. And so do many politicians, as well as one Western government. That government, predictably, is France—the nation with the most significant trade with Iran, Iraq and several other terror regimes. "France doesn't consider [any] countries as terrorist states," a foreign ministry spokesman said in Paris last week.

Why not? Didn't the French (and numerous other Western nations) agree that terrorists and those who harbored them were the enemy? And isn't one of the realities of war that you view yourself as good and the enemy as evil? In that context, President Bush's words are eminently logical.

What's bothering the allies?

Still, two questions arise. First, what exactly is it that bothers the critics of the US so much? Second, since the critics reside mostly in countries which America thinks of as allies, is the alliance itself in tatters?

The answer to the first question is best summed up in words from an article which appeared in the Toronto Star. It said "Furious international reaction to perceived threats from U.S. President George W. Bush highlight the huge gamble he's taking by warning of unilateral American military action unless terrorism is eradicated. Bush told the world in his State of the Union speech that if countries do not defeat terrorism on their own, America will." Then the article lists numerous reasons why that is a terrible idea.

Personally, I thought America's allies backed exactly such a "gamble" when the US decided to attack Afghanistan. The governments of Australia, Canada and some of Europe lauded the effort and even committed troops. Did the Taliban blow up the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? No—it harbored Al Qaida, and that seemed enough justification for war. In short, the seemingly united West did exactly what the Toronto Star and countless others in the media now portray as a prescription for disaster: a sovereign nation did not go after terrorists on its own soil, so America did.

How are the regimes of Iraq, Iran and North Korea different from Taliban-led Afghanistan? All three funnel a huge amount of national expenditure into armaments programs, while ordinary citizens go wanting. In North Korea, the population has for some time been on the brink of famine; in Iraq, mass poverty has caused widespread malnutrition and health problems. All three nations are run by dictatorial regimes; anyone believing that Iraqis would in a free election vote for Saddam Hussein, or North Koreans for Kim Jong-Il, is out of touch with reality. In Iran, the only nation among the three that holds relatively free elections, there is evidence that the corrupt regime of the mullahs is highly unpopular; their leader, Ayatollah Khameni, has been soundly defeated, but still holds on to power.

Worse, Iran, Iraq and North Korea have for some time been known to engage in the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction. Iran and Iraq are known to have stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons, while North Korea is actively tinkering with the development of nuclear capacity and the ballistic systems necessary to deploy it. The Taliban never did such a thing, did it?

A return to isolationism?

So why do America's reluctant allies feel Iran, Iraq and North Korea are different from Afghanistan? Although they haven't articulated it, it can only be that the Taliban was targeted as *the result of* an attack on America, rather than *in advance of* one. Perhaps the Europeans, Canadians and Australians feel that preemptive attacks are not tolerable.

If that is the case, the US should distance itself from its erstwhile allies at the earliest opportunity. The concept that a nation is only able to act against the scourge of terrorism when the equivalents of its World Trade Centers and Pentagons are blown up will not be workable in the post-September 11 world. America's doctrine of targeting nations like Iran, Iraq and North Korea is premised on this: even if none of them may ever launch a first strike against a Western target, how long will it be before Tehran supplies its allies Hamas, Hezbollah or Jihad, or Iraq equips the still formidable Al Qaida with its destructive products? George W. Bush is absolutely correct in calling these three nations an "axis of evil". My only regret is that the US president did not lump in a score of other terrorist nations with them.

I've said for some time that the Powell approach of building as large a coalition as possible was intellectually faulty. The Europeans and Canada cheered the most loudly at such a noble cause—now they are the first to get cold feet. There are several consequences to the growing split in the alliance against terrorism. The immediate result will be the isolation of Colin Powell within his cabinet and the end of the ill-conceived Bush Doctrine ("If you're not with us, you're against us.")

The longer-term outcome will be the very thing the allies say they wanted to avoid: a period of renewed isolationism for the United States. Which tells you a lot about the political skills of America's chosen allies. □

Axis of Evil – Part II

Sometimes it's best to brush rhetoric aside and let facts speak. While much of the world is up in arms over Mr. Bush's warning to "regimes of evil", let's take count of what the president has achieved:

1. Iran, despite its stage-managed anti-American protest, has vowed to arrest Al Qaida operatives on its soil. Before President Bush's State-of-the-Union speech, Iran assisted terrorists fleeing there from Afghanistan.
2. China, Russia, several Arab nations and Turkey are suddenly determined to pressure Baghdad to allow UN weapons inspectors back in. The same nations were non-committal prior to Mr. Bush's speech.
3. Yassir Arafat last week wrote to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, pledging "to stop arms smuggling and sever ties with Iran". Even though Arafat still denies that the Palestinian Authority was involved with the recently seized armaments cargo, he's evidently frightened.

In short, there is at least the promise of progress on several fronts, as a direct consequence of George W. Bush's choice of words.

None of which is to say that the strategy and objectives behind the War On Terrorism aren't flawed. I've detailed my reservations in previous issues—in a nutshell, they are: 1. Inconsistency (the West's anti-terrorism fight is not equally applied); 2. A lack of attainability (terrorism cannot be eliminated); 3. The Bush Doctrine (if you're not with us, you're against us).

Alliance an embarrassment

The latter concept brought with it the need to build a very large alliance, with all the disadvantages that come with it. To all who bother looking, the coalition is already in tatters and the US is as hypocritical in keeping up a "front" as its doubters are in abandoning the cause.

Judge for yourself

The Geneva Convention, Article 4, lists the conditions required for "prisoner of war" status:

- a. That of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates;
- b. That of having a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance;
- c. That of carrying arms openly;

Australia and Canada have been the loudest voices in the chorus over the treatment of Taliban and Al Qaida captives. I have a message to Sydney and Ottawa: if you want to do something for humanity, start with your aboriginal communities at home. France has been the harshest critic on what Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine calls America's intellectual simplicity, which, he says, manifests itself in "taking decisions based on its own view of the world". He also censures the US for not doing enough to alleviate "root causes like poverty and injustice".

I find it hard to argue with Vedrine, but it strikes me as bizarre that such misgivings should come from France. Any list of nations more parochial than the US would include the French near its top. And if France is that interested in doing away with poverty and injustice, why is it one of the smallest contributors towards the Afghanistan Aid Plan? France's contribution is a paltry \$24 million over five years--compared to Iran's \$560 million, America's \$295 million (on top of roughly \$120 million in humanitarian relief already administered), Germany's \$263 million and India's and Pakistan's pledges of \$100 million each.

What next?

While the chorus of dissent from America's allies is growing, President Bush's support at home remains sky-high. Even Bush's erstwhile adversary, former Vice President Al Gore, had the grace and generosity to congratulate the administration for a job well done so far. Still, Mr. Bush's team is now under immense pressure to decide what should be next in the War On Terrorism.

The threat of moving against the "axis of evil" whenever the US feels its safety is threatened has so far worked: it's refocused the world on the need to apply pressure on Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Whether that will prove enough will be up to the leadership of these rogue nations. If they ignore America's warnings, the price they and America will pay may be considerable.

The situation is alarming but not without hope. Consider that Libya is a very different nation today from what it was a few years ago, when its leader threatened to annihilate the West and financed airplane bombings and other atrocities. It's critical to understand what changed Ghaddafi: it was plain language, backed up with decisive action. And it worked. □