16/09/2002

Terror: A new perspective

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LIKE Dr Watson in the Sherlock Homes fable related by Defence Minister
Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, our political leaders have to stop looking up
at the sky for convoluted astronomical explanations, because the root
causes of terrorism are as obvious as the fact that "Someone has stolen
our tent!"

I would like to offer a different American perspective - or at least the
perspective of a different American.

There is now broad agreement that defeating or eliminating terrorism
requires us to understand and address its root causes.

This was not always the case. I remember very well the extremely
agitated climate of Washington in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. There
was little interest in root causes, only in hunting down the terrorists
and bringing them to justice, dead or alive.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was warmly appreciated by
the US after the attacks, for his compassionate expressions of support and
sympathy, and his strong denunciations of the terrorists, but not for his
insistence that terrorism could only be defeated by addressing its root
causes. Emotions were too high then to accept the kind of reasoned and
forward-looking approach advocated by the Dr Mahathir. But eventually his
view prevailed, even in Washington.

By the time the Prime Minister came to the White House last May, on a
visit that established a new high point in Malaysia-US relations, as I am
sure Ambassador Huhtala will confirm, he was applauded when he called on
the international community to defeat terrorism not only by hunting down
the terrorists, but also by removing terrorism's root causes.

Unfortunately, there was no agreement then or now on what these root
causes are. Instead, there have been different theories.

One of the most counter-productive identifies the root causes of the
Sept 11 attacks as the Islamic affiliation of the hijackers themselves,
and of those in the Middle East and South Asia who share their extreme
religious beliefs and practices. This view unfairly stigmatises the
followers of one of the world's greatest and noblest religions; it also
sets up a false conflict between Islam (or at least a particular
expression of it) and Christianity.

Because nations, like people, do not negotiate or compromise over their
religious principles, a conflict of this kind would be irreconcilable. If
these were the root causes of terrorism, there is nothing we could do
about them, and terrorism would be inevitable. It is equally counter-
productive to identify the root causes of terrorism as a "clash of
cultures" or "clash of values". Culture clashes certainly occur, but there
is no evidence that they lead to terrorism.

It is simplistic and self-serving for political leaders in the West to
tell us that the terrorists attack us because they "hate freedom", or
"hate our democratic values" or "they despise our love of liberty".

Many may, in fact, hate what they perceive as materialistic Western
values, but this is not what leads them to kill themselves in suicide
bombings, or to murder thousands of innocent civilians.

The root causes of terrorism aren't religious, and they aren't cultural.
They are political, as Datuk Dr Munir Majid said.

The former White House National Security Advisor and well-known scholar
Zbigniew Brzezinski recently wrote these words: "Missing from much of the

public debate is discussion of the simple fact that lurking behind every terroristic act are specific political causes."

If we focus on political causes, the roots of the horrific attacks of Sept 11 are discernible. To both the terrorists themselves, and to many across the Middle East and beyond who sympathise with their objectives if not their methods, they hate us not because of our "freedom" or our "love of liberty", but because of the freedom and the liberty that we deny to the people of Palestine.

They hate us not because of our "democratic values", but because they believe we subvert the will of the people, and sovereignty itself, in Middle Eastern countries where we exercise strong political and military influences, even in close proximity to sacred religious sites. They hate us because they believe we are inflicting cruel and inhuman punishment on the people of Iraq.

And, it is reasonable to assume, they will have still another reason to hate us if we ignore the fundamental precepts of international law, enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter which forbid any State from violating the territorial integrity, sovereignty or political independence of any other State. But this is exactly what we will do if Steve Forbes is correct in what he told us and we launch an unprovoked military attack on Iraq for the purpose of bringing about a so-called "regime change" in that country.

If these political causes are in fact the principal root causes of the terror that shocked the world a year ago on Sept 11, a roadmap emerges leading to an end of this kind of terrorism. Whether the map will be followed is another question, but the right direction is clearly marked. What is required is not a surrender of religious principles, moral or cultural values, or political freedom.

What is required is a change in attitude and awareness, leading to a change in governmental policies. What is required is a new set of policies, emphasising justice, respect and support for peoples who have been unjustly abused, oppressed, humiliated and impoverished in the Middle East and elsewhere. What is required is a new set of policies that reject the unilateral or pre-emptive use of force in favour of multilateral consensus and international law.

It will take wisdom and courage to bring about these new policies. But there is no other way to end terrorism, or to prevent the horror of Sept 11 from repeating itself, God forbid, and inscribing some other tragic date or dates in our collective memories and fears.

In conclusion, I want to emphasise that to identify the root causes of terrorism is not to condone it. Terrorism has no place in a civilised world.

There must be zero tolerance for it. We must certainly hunt down terrorists and bring them to justice, according to law. But we can only eliminate terrorism itself by acting justly, wisely and collectively to remove its political causes.

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