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US unilateralism leaves allies, partners high and dry

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AS THE Davos men and women descended on New York, the authorities in the Big Apple dusted off an obscure and constitutionally dubious 1855 law that allows the arrest of three or more people appearing in public in masks.

The highly visible presence of the New York Police Department (NYPD), on horseback, bicycles, on foot in full uniform and arms and others in plain clothes, ensured that the networking, workshops, meetings, luncheons, dinners and parties for the 3,000 participants of the World Economic Forum (WEF) were not interrupted.

The anti-globalisation protestors were kept at a safe distance not only by the heavy presence of the NYPD but also the concrete barricades. No one was allowed near the Waldorf Astoria, the venue of the Forum, unless they lived, worked in the area or were accredited to the meeting. Passes had to be worn at all times and clearly visible.

The tight security was understandable in the city that had experienced its worst attack on September 11. Americans are still trying to reconcile and come to terms with the disaster which took not only American lives but of citizens of many countries.

A visit to Ground Zero is an emotional experience even for Malaysians. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali who visited the site were equally touched. They laid a wreath and paid their respects to those who perished, including several Malaysians, in the World Trade Centre attack.

Back in the heated conference and meeting rooms of the Waldorf Astoria, discussions on "Leadership in Fragile Times" - the theme of this year's Forum - took on a life of its own. The Americans were not going to let participants forget the horrible events of September 11. It did not matter that citizens of other countries also perished in the disaster, the Americans took hold of the "agenda" and "ran with it". Others have been told that they will have to follow it or be left out. It seems to be "the American way or no way" and echoes loudly the words of President George W. Bush who had declared "either you are with us or against us".

Bush articulated his Administration's unilateral approach in his State of the Union address delivered just ahead of the Forum. His Cabinet colleagues including Secretary of State Colin Powell, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, carried the message, loud and clear, to the Forum as did Deputy US Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to the Wehrkunde conference of global defence ministers in Munich.

Participants from around the world were told that the US was committed to defining its own solutions to some of the toughest international problems, even if that angers some allies. The 3,000 participants - kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, movers and shakers of the business world, government, religious and civil society leaders, academics and media representatives - were warned that America would "go after terrorism wherever it threatens free men and women" even if that meant taking on "evil regimes".

The US has abandoned its commitments to coalition building and concerns are being expressed that the US Administration was charting its own rules and will act as it sees fit.

Undoubtedly, the American unilateralism has its allies, coalition partners and many others around the world worried. According to Stratfor,

Strategic Forecasting, Britain is extremely concerned that, as one of the US' closest allies, it could become a hapless adjunct to Washington's "war on everyone". The UK is at the centre of the Afghan relief effort. It is also a key member of the US coalition against Al Qaeda.

Javier Solana, Secretary General of the Council of the European Union and High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, said in order for the coalition to sustain itself, there has to be "collective ambition, collective responsibility and collective burden sharing".

Malaysia is also concerned and as Dr Mahathir said at the end of his visit to New York the country is "uncomfortable with US unilateralism... And rightly so! There is a tendency to export American laws and apply them in other countries. This would be wrong in terms of international practice".

Confrontations were hardly subtle during the WEF - no sooner had Powell finished on how to deal with "rogue regimes", Solana told him that his allies did not just want consultation but that they want a real vote. "For me, the coalition is a collective ambition to share responsibility, but to share also decision-making," he added.

Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, summed up discussions in his session at the WEF: "For the Europeans, the axis of evil was a bridge too far. There is a strong suspicion here that Bush is back to unilateralism, that after Afghanistan, America isn't especially interested in listening to the rest of the world".

Even its strongest ally and coalition partner in Afghanistan - Britain - feels left out in the cold and is attempting to mitigate US unilateralism.

According to Stratfor, the British Foreign Office has dismissed Bush's assessment of Iran as part of an "axis of evil" (the others named were Iran and North Korea), noting that Britain will continue to seek engagement with Teheran.

Britain is trying to mitigate US unilateralism and has asked Beijing for access to western Chinese airbases for use in support of relief operations in Afghanistan. London has also contacted Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, any of which could provide adequate support.

Stratfor says that London's overture to Beijing represents a test, for both countries, of their ability to contain US unilateralism. For Britain, it is a question of whether there is room to change Washington's mind before being dragged loyally into every hotspot on the globe.

For China, it is a question of whether it can manage the US through cooperation, without succumbing either to US hegemony or to internal upheaval.

But even as Europeans voice their concern, the Americans are not about to budge. The Bush Administration has made up its mind. Wolfowitz told participants of the Wehrkunde conference that in the wars of the future "there will not be a single coalition but rather different coalitions for different missions".

The question that begs to be answered - What about North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato)? According to an editorial in the Wall Street Journal, the answer is: "Nato matters less and less, as the war in Afghanistan shows". It adds that with the exception of the Brits and Turks, Europeans have been less relevant to waging that war than the Uzbeks and the Kazakhs and the Pakistanis.

Pakistan's position in the US' list of allies has risen rapidly up the ladder. The irony is that Bush did not even know President Pervez Musharraf's name in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2000 and the country together with India were subjected to sanctions following their nuclear tests in 1998.

At the end of the day the US dictates, defines and redefines its

policies and position based on its own self interest. Currently, its unilateralism - whether the rest of the world, its allies and coalition partners included, like it or not.

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