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September the 11th : two years later[†]

Very soon after the triple attacks that shocked the world took the lives of 3,000 innocents people in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and over the skies of Pennsylvania, it soon became almost clichéd to state that on that day the world changed forever. But what does this statement mean? What really has changed since that day 2 years ago? How different is the United States? What has happened to the transatlantic relations between the USA and Europe? Is the world a safer, or more dangerous place? And perhaps most importantly, what effect, if any has this had on the Republic of Hungary and its safety?

The Event

The synchronised attacks of two years ago have to be recognised as historic in significance. They represent the most deadly terrorist attack of the modern age. Yes, it is true that violent sects such as India's Thuggees did kill more people than al Qaeda, but they did so over a period of centuries. Also, although nation-states have demonstrated the willingness and ability to kill thousands of people in one event – remember here the Milosevic-inspired ethnic cleansing of Srebrenica and Sarajevo, or the America bombing of Nagasaki – no sub-state terrorist group has managed to kill as many people as al Qaeda did on that one morning. Not the IRA, not ETA, not the Baader-Meinhof Group.

The attack itself, despite its size, is also significant historically in terms of the methods used. For several years before the attack, starting under the Clinton administration, Washington was becoming increasingly scared of a terrorist attack inflicting thousands of casualties through the use of a weapon of mass destruction. The devilish “beauty” of September the 11th lies in the fact that through it al Qaeda was able to inflict casualties commensurate to the use of a weapon of mass destruction, yet with instruments that were otherwise “innocent” or innocuous – jet-airliners, knives and mobile phones. As a result this extremist Islamicist group was able to become the most dangerous terrorist organisation the modern world has ever seen.

Here I feel I must stop for a moment and address those ideas that I personally have heard in the last two years when I was discussing these issues at various events across the nation. Wherever I was, be it Hegyeshalom, Budapest, or Pécs, sooner or later someone would suggest that the attacks were nothing to do with al Qaeda, the Islamic world or Arabs, but the work of either Mossad, the CIA, or both together. I must admit that from time to time, I too enjoy a good conspiracy theory story.

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Nevertheless, there is no room for it here. Since the attacks, the various authorities have successfully uncovered the identities of all the hijackers. Of the 19 members of the team, all were Muslims, and almost all carried a Saudi passport, Saudi Arabia (along with Egypt) being the hot-bed of Arab extremism at the moment. What is more, once the attackers lives were investigated by various international authorities, it became clear that several had personally received training in the “terrorist universities” of al Qaeda, be it in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the Sudan. After all this evidence, to suggest that Mossad or the CIA engineered the attacks, or tricked the 19 into doing what they did is untenable. (Note: On the day of the attack the CIA only had one employee out of its 15,000+ staff who even spoke Pashtun. As a result it is clear that organising such an attack would be impossible for a country that knew - and still knows – relatively little about world of Arab extremism.)

The Event’s Consequences

Having analysed and classified the event itself, what can we say about its repercussions? Several things. Firstly, that the residents of the United States are still afraid. Despite the popularity of President Bush dropping recently and the increased criticism being made publicly of his foreign policy in Afghanistan and especially Iraq, it is interesting to note that the climate of fear ensured that not one Congressman was prepared to speak against the President’s demands this week for an additional 80+ billion dollars for the war on terror. American politicians are aware of the fact that this would be suicidal given the average voters attitude to the perceived threat.

More specifically, on a geostrategic level, it has been clear up to now that the US has developed a unilateral stance in its international relations. In itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Remember that there was a great Republican leader of the US – Ronald Reagan – who is famous for having followed an increasingly unilateral stance with regard to his enemy, the Soviet Union, a unilateralism that even his closest advisors tried to advise him against. Nevertheless, his vision prevailed and as a result, many people are in fact grateful to that president for being instrumental in winning the Cold War against the “Evil Empire”. Nevertheless, things have changed. Reagan’s unilateralism was defined against another superpower. Today there is but one superpower, and as a result when it acts unilaterally it annoys many people, specially those much weaker than itself. In fact it scares some countries. Secondly the level of unilateralism, especially as embodied in the form of undiplomatic leaders such as Donald Rumsfeld (famous for his dividing Europe into “new” and “old”), is such that it has led many to fear for the future integrity of transatlantic institutions such as NATO and even the UN. Even so, if the announcements made this week by the administration in Washington are to be taken at face value, announcements to the effect America wants other nations and the UN to help in its efforts to stabilise Iraq, then it may be that the White House has recognised the limits of unilateralism in a post-Cold War world where international consultation and cooperation is hard to ignore.

Before the reader begin to relax, and feel comfortable that at last issues of international security are normalising and returning to the purview of the UN, I must add a few comments. Firstly, even with UN support it will not be easy to truly



stabilise Iraq or Afghanistan, or to eliminate the threat of al Qaeda. At the moment the US is struggling in both countries because it is easy for a superpower to win a war, but harder to maintain the peace. For this you can't really use soldiers, but need instead a stable domestic administration supported by a domestic police force. Currently it seems as if the White House and the Pentagon do not understand this. As a result its soldiers, not trained for police work, are becoming more and more the target of attack, seen as they are to be a military force of occupation and not a local authority. Secondly, the representatives of the US in Iraq are literally giving suitcases of money to local, unelected leaders and strongmen in the naïve hope that it will be spent on worthy projects and not the needs of the corrupt and the extremists. The UN is a little better at such "state rebuilding" exercises, but here too there is a question of legitimacy. (Do not forget that even the UN headquarters was attacked in Iraq recently).

In the run-up to the war, much fuss was made concerning the lack of a UN mandate for the use of force. But why is the stamp of approval of the Security Council so important now in a post-Cold War world? The council's permanent members include countries such as Russia, China and France. Two of these can hardly be said to be szalonfahig democracies and the third has done little in the interests of any country but itself. Legitimacy in international relations, and especially in crises connected to the Middle East and Arab world, should depend far more on what the relevant Muslim and Arab nations have to say. For example, Turkey, Pakistan and India. It is with their help that moderates will win the fight against extremists and zones of conflict will be stabilised. Likewise, the US and the West will not be able to fully eradicate threats such as al Qaeda unless it can enlist the help of those nations that have the cultural tools which will enable them to understand, penetrate and destroy such Islamicist organisations.

In the meantime, the threat remains. As a result of our nation being a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, we too are theoretically at risk. We are not however, in the first line of those countries that are most attractive targets for al Qaeda. These remain the US, the UK and Australia, those countries that were on the ground first in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even so, ever since the Hungarian government decided to train Iraqi fighters at the southern Hungarian military base of Taszár, we are amongst those nations that have done more than simply support their Atlantic allies with words and rhetoric. Whilst there existed many other – better – ways to support the war on terror, other alternatives that Hungary could have offered, the real question is, should we support this campaign with all its complications or not. Should we help at all, or just stick our head in the sand, or walk away? One reason should make us decide in favour of action versus inaction. If as Hungarians, 1956 means something to us, if the fight to rid one small country in the world of dictatorship was important then, then it should be now. There is therefore no reason to say that the removal of the Hussein regime was fundamentally an unethical act.

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