

The Lessons of September 11

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The attacks of September 11 2001, aroused an emotional shock of the kind we rarely see. Their odious nature and their broadcast and replay on national television struck at the very heart of American power. All of this contributed to making the event unparalleled. It will constitute an important moment in the world of international relations even if it is imprudent to see it as the harbinger of the Third World War or even as the beginning of a new era in international relations, as certain commentators have announced, undoubtedly a bit precipitously. Nevertheless, several lessons can be taken from the attacks.

Have we entered a completely new phase in international relations?

The revelation of the American superpower's vulnerability is obviously a new and highly important factor. In spite of this, the global force proportions among the great powers have only moderately evolved. The relative places occupied by China, Europe, Russia or Japan have changed little and in a very weak manner. Thus, even vulnerable, the United States still knows no rival in its capabilities and has not seen its trump cards truly challenged. The essential problems, such as dealing with the Middle East peace process, the struggle against economic inequality, environmental protection, civil wars in Africa, etc., have been neither completely changed nor resolved. Terrorism existed before September 11 2001 (even if it had never been so spectacularly deadly), and intrastate actors had already played an important role before that date. Therefore it is exaggerated to consider September 11 the debut of a totally different era from the one we knew before. The event does not have the same significance as the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, which truly opened up a completely different world. But even if it does not constitute an historic rupture, it is obvious that September 11 2001 already constitutes an important date in the field of international relations.

Is this the beginning of a Third World War or a war of civilisations?

The answer to these two questions is certainly not.

Samuel Huntington's thesis, developed in 1993, has long been criticised by the large majority of commentators for its predetermined and fallacious character. In the current crisis, it is striking to note that, except for a few extremists, all the Western and Muslim political leaders were careful to take the opposite view.¹ But the thesis has nevertheless remained in the strategic debate since 1993 and has regained considerable support since the attacks. It has the advantage of furnishing a way of reading recent events that is at the same time simple and intellectualised. The irony resides in the fact that, at the beginning of the 1990s, this thesis corresponded more to the vision of Saddam Hussein than to that of the coalition that defeated him (which consisted of Western and Muslim states). In fact, today, it corresponds more to the vision and wishes of Osama Bin Laden than to current reality. One can imagine that Bin Laden would have appreciated it if the United States had let loose an indiscriminate riposte, which could have been viewed as a generalised attack on the Muslim world. There has been nothing like it but the risk remains that this false theory, once evoked, could prove self-fulfilling.

The United States is not invulnerable

For the first time since 1812,² the United States has been struck on its continental territory by an external enemy. The human losses suffered in a single day represent the equivalent of three Pearl Harbors or an eighth of the total during the Vietnam War. The attacks were aimed, surprisingly, at citizens at work. They touched the two symbols of American power: military power with the Pentagon, economic power with the World Trade Center. Had it not been for the courage of the passengers of United Airlines flight 93, who struggled against the hijackers and made the plane crash outside of inhabited areas, they could have reached the White House, the actual centre of power, as much national as international. This attack was brought against the US at a moment when the major debate in international relations was focused on the unipolarity of the world, engendered by America's hyperpower which surpasses, by far, all others. The new administration wanted to question numerous multilateral and bilateral engagements and refused to consent to new ones because, it said, they did not take this new force

1 With the unfortunate exception of Silvio Berlusconi, Italian prime minister, who did not hesitate to declare on September 27 2001: "One cannot place all civilisations on the same plane. One must be conscious of our supremacy, of the superiority of Western civilisation. The West will continue to westernise and to impose itself on other peoples. This has already succeeded with the Communist world and with the Islamic world. [...] We should be conscious of the superiority of our civilisation, a system of values that has brought great prosperity and that guarantees the respect of human rights and religious liberties." *Le Figaro*, September 28 2001

2 When Great Britain invaded Washington.

distribution into account.³ Washington and New York were struck while the United States possessed a military apparatus that surpasses that of all other nations to an extent unequalled in history. Yet, the United States discovered that, even with 40 percent of global military spending, it is vulnerable. This cannot but change its relations with the world.

This is not the first time since the end of the Second World War that the United States finds itself in a position of vulnerability. It already experienced this situation during the Cold War, as of 1957, when the Soviets acquired intercontinental missile technology. This led the Americans to revise their nuclear strategy: because of the threat of mutually assured destruction, they entered into a strategic dialogue with the Soviet Union which led to détente and the policy of arms control. Yet, one can hardly envisage what equivalent could be achieved with the new adversary, whose wish is to destroy rather than to share power at world level. It is difficult to imagine starting up a dialogue between Washington and the masterminds of the attacks, given the incompatibility of their objectives.

Discovery of this vulnerability will have a major impact on US policy

The United States knows henceforth that its territory is not “deglobalised”, that globalisation has strategic and also tragic consequences, including for Americans. This is the end of the exceptionalism that has characterised the United States until now and that was behind the desire to go ahead with the implementation of National Missile Defense (NMD). Confronted with this new situation, the United States can adopt one of two attitudes. It can conclude that, since the world is even more dangerous than it thought, it is important to protect itself better. Therefore it will develop military means, accelerate its NMD program, hesitate to involve itself in the “hot topics” that seem to be inextricable at the global level and reinforce its unilateralism. It can give priority to a purely patriotic reaction and principally celebrate its own values in avenging the attack. It can repeat emulously that its system is superior and that even such an important shock cannot truly destabilise it. But common sense dictates that this reaction would not lead out of the impasse, but to a deepening of the crisis.

On the other hand, the US could realise that its revealed vulnerability makes it important to take better account of critiques from abroad, to make an effort to understand the aspirations of others, to distinguish between its discourse and its practices and to see the way in which it is perceived from outside.

Finally, the US should not give new priority to its “hard power” (military, economic and technical), but rather to its “soft power” (capacity for influence, attraction and popularity). A vulnerable nation must become more prudent than a power that thinks it has nothing to fear. This terrible event could have beneficial repercussions on US policy in rendering it more sensitive to the outside

³ See IRIS, “Le renforcement de l’unilatéralisme et le déclin du *soft power* américain”, *L’Année Stratégique 2002* (Paris : IRIS-L’Etudiant, 2001) p. 23-9.

environment: Pearl Harbor reminded us that isolationism is a chimera; the World Trade Center proves that unilateralism is a dead end.

Finally, if biological weapons represent an important threat, would it not be better to introduce a verification clause to reinforce the 1972 prohibition treaty? If terrorism lives on laundered money and one of the ways to fight it is to dry up these funds, would it not be of value to battle against fiscal paradises? If the West does not designate Islam as the enemy and intends to build a vast international coalition against terrorism, should not the United Nations (UN) be involved in this? In forming the largest possible coalition, would it not be better to open up a dialogue with other nations to convince them rather than impose conditions? And if the Middle East conflict remains a major source of Arab frustrations, would it not be time to exert some pressure on Israel?

Confronted with this drama, the United States has for the moment reacted with as much dignity as political intelligence. It consults, takes account of the strategic complexities and is conscious that it cannot, through its power alone, impose its solutions on the rest of the world. In short, it has put aside the “bull in a china shop” behaviour that characterised it. If this change should prove lasting, then effectively, one could advance the idea that we have entered a new world.

Power can become a factor of weakness if it is perceived as an excess

The events occurring in Afghanistan, a remote country, poor and distant, have had repercussions on the heart of the American empire. Globalisation has reached a tragic stage and applies just as easily – how could it be otherwise? – to questions of security. There can be no atoll of peace and prosperity in an ocean of misery and violence. The walls of money and technology are less impermeable than the Iron Curtain.

Power no longer seems to protect against the outside world, but on the contrary, it seems to attract – rightly or wrongly – rancour, jealousy, frustration and even hate. Because power engenders as many obligations as it does rights, the outside world is more demanding of a great power than of a lesser one, and is less willing to accept that its power be used egoistically – against the common interest – rather than in the service of a general cause.

Some have avowed that the attacks could just as easily have taken place in Europe. It is obvious that this is not the case. There is a strong anti-American sentiment that does not have an equivalent for Europe. The most radical challengers of the world order concentrate their reproach on the US, not on Europe, which is judged as being both less powerful and more sensitive to the aspirations of other nations. This does not mean, obviously, the Europe is immune to terrorism, but this attack, by its magnitude, its element of surprise and its message, clearly targeted the United States.

In this global village, not everyone reacts in the same way

The emotion, the condemnation and the disgust provoked by these attacks were unanimous in the rich and developed world. The general sentiment was an immediate and non-negotiable solidarity with the Americans, although that does not mean going along with all the decisions of the American authorities.

One must be conscious that the emotion created by the attacks has not been uniform the world round. It is extremely strong in all the developed democratic nations because they identify easily with the American citizens who were affected. It seems nevertheless to have made several cleavages apparent, including in the heart of Western countries. The suburbs were less sensitive to the American misfortune than richer city centres. The elites intoned the phrase "We are all Americans" more often than the rest of the population. In the same way, this emotion revealed itself to be less important in the southern countries, where the populations have experienced diverse hardships (famine, underdevelopment, natural disasters, civil wars and ineffective, corrupt and brutal regimes) without the West taking any action, or at least, without taking sufficient action to modify this state of affairs. The relative indifference, or lesser emotion of southern countries could shock a part of Western opinion; however, it is a fact. The difference is even greater in the Arab and Muslim world. Though only the Iraqi regime decided not to condemn the attacks, the populations of the Muslim nations are not particularly pained by American hardships.

We absolutely must, beyond the condemnation of this attitude, succeed in understanding the motivations. How do we explain the frustrations of the Arab world? Why do the majority of the people there accuse the Western world, and chiefly the United States, of hypocrisy and of adopting a double-standard policy? Are we still equal to the image that we have of ourselves? Are the accusations of arrogance always unfounded?

Emotion and solidarity must not prevent reflection

We must understand these events. To understand does not mean to excuse or accord extenuating circumstances to those who committed these crimes. Those responsible – and their accomplices – must receive a punishment equal to their crimes and be prevented from harming again. To understand means that in order to avoid other events like that of the World Trade Center and to fight terrorism, the underlying mechanisms must be dismantled. Emotion, as legitimate as it is, should not constitute the only response to these attacks.

We must not shy away from placing the event in its context. Terrorism is not spontaneous; it is the abject and bitter fruit of political phenomena. One is not born a terrorist, as some would have us believe; one becomes one. Terrorism is not a spontaneous phenomenon coming straight from hell.

It is equally wrong to say that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had nothing to do with the attacks (endlessly repeating that the first attack on the World Trade Center was committed at the beginning of the Oslo process) as if is to say that its

resolution will make terrorism disappear. The situation of the Palestinians is one of the causes – not the only one – that nourish terrorism.

Those responsible must be punished, but again it is necessary that they be clearly identified. We must not err in choosing our targets. American policymakers adopted the right attitude in that the inflexible and legitimate will to avenge has not led to haste in practice. Yet military safeguards, though necessary, are not sufficient in and of themselves. Punishing the guilty must not make us forget that we have to ensure that others do not take their place in the future. It is certainly necessary to punish the terrorists, but above all else, we must work to eradicate the environment in which they develop. In practice, it cannot but be a long-term political undertaking.

All of this must lead to the rehabilitation of policy

This could take several forms. First of all, politics are global and cannot be pursued in the function of individual and unconnected goals. It was certainly necessary to combat the Soviet Union and its presence in Afghanistan, but perhaps the methods used then proved to be counterproductive in the end: the enemy of my enemy is not always my friend, or at least does not always remain that way for very long. Did not the priority given to bypassing Iran in the oil trade lead us to close our eyes to the nature of the Taliban regime? It may have brought a certain form of power to Afghanistan, but it did not really establish the sought-after stability. Likewise, just because one power has been challenged by another in the past does not mean that any evolution in the latter should be ignored. In this respect, US policy regarding Iran or Iraq does not seem to be very clairvoyant.

This is also the defeat of an all-military or all-technology policy. Despite its listening and interception systems, the United States was unable to prevent the attacks. Were they predictable? Perhaps not! But, in any case, would it not have been a better idea, perhaps, to sacrifice less to the search for technological superiority and assign more not just to human intelligence, but also to prevention and solidarity rather than to means of punishment.

One can easily see that in order to eradicate the causes of frustration, the inequalities, or the diverse views of injustice held by other populations, what we need are not a “force field” or purely military reactions, but political responses. If there is a lesson to be taken from the tragedy in the United States, it is that the solution to this type of problem is not technological, it is not militaristic, it is above all political.

Europe showed itself unified in two important ways

Europe was unified in its solidarity with the United States, but there was also unity among the Fifteen. There were no divergent positions among the European leaders, who made the same analysis of the event and took from it the same conclusions. It is paradoxical that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO) was invoked for the first time in history in favour of the United States. However there is logic in the European positions: solidarity with the United States when it is attacked, but, at the same time, the wish not to follow it blindly into everything it does or whatever kind of response it may have. There is a European desire for this response not to be carried out in an indiscriminate manner against civilian populations.

In exchange for this solidarity, Europe waits for a concerted effort on the part of the United States. Europe is even more unified because it sees itself as having a role to play in the post-September 11 world. It sees its policy towards the Arab world and the Middle East notably justified by events. Three days after the attacks, the foreign ministers of the Fifteen adopted a veritable battle plan against terrorism, including both judicial and policing measures and a political program to “favour the integration of all nations in a global system of security and prosperity”, aimed at attacking not only the effects but also the causes of terrorism.

In and of themselves, the events of the World Trade Center do not constitute an historic break, despite their undeniable importance. But, according to the conclusions that will be drawn from them and the modifications in political orientations, fundamental changes could ensue. If a lasting political emerges at the global level, in an attempt to treat the problems long left unresolved because it was naively believed that their dramatic repercussions were geographically limited, then we could witness a profound strategic modification of the interpretation of the attacks. The lessons that must be taken from them are therefore much more important than the event itself.