

Foreign Policy Shift: The Terrible Trade-Offs

By Jim Lobe and Abid Aslam

The United States used to judge countries by whether or not they supported Washington in its anti-Soviet crusade. Now it appears that foreign governments will be rewarded or punished by whether or not they become part of the U.S.-led war against terrorism, particularly of the Islamist kind.

As President Bush put it during his September 20 address to Congress, “every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”

“That will be the first question the U.S. has for any country,” according to Thomas Donilon, former Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s chief of staff. “What we’ve seen is a real paradigm shift in foreign policy in which the central organizing principle will be the effort against terrorism.”

If true, the implications of this sudden shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities are huge, not only for America itself but for the rest of the world as well.

Virtually overnight, a government’s record on respecting human rights, fighting corruption, foregoing nuclear weapons, supporting the rule of law, and protecting the environment—issues which national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) labored years trying to move up the Washington foreign-policy agenda, especially in the aftermath of the cold war—has been kicked down at least one rung on the ladder of U.S. policy priorities to make way for the new antiterrorist agenda.

Already, the administration is seeking authority to waive restrictions on U.S. economic aid, military assistance and weapons sales to selected countries as a carrot to join the anti-terrorist coalition. As during the cold war, the underlying and all-too-familiar logic seems to be: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Senior officials say the arms-curbs waiver would be applied sparingly and, initially, is only intended to cover Pakistan and India, both of whom exploded nuclear weapons in 1998.

“What kind of signal is George Bush sending to the world about his vision of global security with this deal?” asked Gerd Leipold, director of Greenpeace International. “The prize of a temporary alliance cannot be at the cost of further nuclear proliferation in an already volatile region.”

But that is precisely the kind of trade-off which is being avidly pursued as the administration marshals its new-found friends behind it.

“Rather than demand that countries such as Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia democratize,” noted Robert Kaplan in Sunday’s *Washington Post*, “we will have to increasingly tolerate benign dictatorships and various styles of hybrid regimes, provided that they help us in our new struggle.”

That admonition is already being applied by the administration, which appears determined to cultivate just about any state in the Islamic world, regardless of their human rights record. Early candidates include the highly authoritarian (some say neo-Stalinist) states of Central Asia, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, China, and even Sudan, which is widely accused of genocidal tactics in its war against the Nuba and the southern, predominantly Christian population.

So alarming is the trend in this respect that Human Rights Watch, in a September 24 open letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell, warned of the danger “that some governments may cynically take advantage of this cause to justify their own internal crackdowns on perceived political opponents, ‘separatists’ or religious activists, in the expectation that the United States will now be silent.”

“In many of the countries Human Rights Watch monitors, there already is a sense that the United States may condone actions committed in the name of fighting terrorism that it would have condemned just a short time ago,” the letter stated.

It cited a number of examples of bad actors actively wooed by Washington to take advantage of the situation for their own domestic campaigns against political opposition. Thus, immediately following the attacks:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin, pointed to alleged links between suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and rebels in Chechnya and declared that the United States and Russia now have “a common foe”—implying that Russia expects U.S. acquiescence in a campaign that has indiscriminately targeted civilians.
- The Chinese foreign ministry said that the United States should give its “support and understanding in [China’s] fight against terrorists and separatists”—a reference to Tibet as well as to the Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang province.
- Malaysian authorities seized on the September 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon to justify their Internal Security Act, which restricts peaceful dissent.
- Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer bragged that on the Thursday after the attacks his forces had killed fourteen Palestinians, “with the world remaining absolutely silent.” This was before the current efforts to revive a ceasefire.
- During her visit to Washington last week, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri sought to justify Jakarta’s abusive crackdown in Aceh, Irian Jaya, and other

regions as a campaign against “terrorists and separatists.” She walked away from her meeting with Bush not only with pledges of increased economic and trade assistance, but also the easing of curbs on military ties.

- Macedonian Prime Minister Georgievski said NATO should now be more supportive of his government’s campaign against its Muslim and Albanian opponents.

The danger of such opportunism, according to Human Rights Watch, might best be seen in Uzbekistan, where Washington has already begun sending military personnel to prepare a staging area for operations in Afghanistan.

The government of President Islam Karimov in recent years has imprisoned and tortured thousands of non-violent Muslims for worshipping outside state controls. As in Algeria, Uzbekistan now faces an Islamist insurgency that its own human rights and anti-democratic practices helped to provoke, according to the International Crisis Group, a think tank specializing in conflict resolution.

“President Bush has rightly said this can’t become a war on Islam,” said HRW executive director Kenneth Roth. “Uzbekistan’s indiscriminate persecution of non-violent Muslims is directly undermining his message.”

While Washington has not yet announced a military-aid package for Tashkent, it is already quite clear that in providing a quid, Karimov expects a quo, as do other rulers whom Washington is lining up behind it.

“The risk, of course, is that, by embracing these regimes—particularly providing them with police and military aid—we may actually bolster hard-line elements that will just make

matters worse,” observed one State Department official who asked not to be identified.

Similar logic applies to the economic aid that Washington is planning to provide for its new allies. In Pakistan’s case, the administration has already begun consulting lawmakers on Capitol Hill over a multibillion dollar debt-cancellation package, as well as strong support for future lending by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

With a limited aid budget of its own, the Bush administration can be expected to press the two Bretton Woods agencies to open the lending spigots for a host of countries that would otherwise not pass muster due to corruption and mismanagement. The repoliticization of international lending agencies ten years after the end of the cold war now appears certain.

Even some countries that Washington has charged with backing terrorism may now stand to cash in if they turn on their erstwhile allies.

Human rights activists and others were shocked last week when, reportedly acting on orders from the White House, Speaker of the House of Representatives Dennis Hastert intervened to prevent action on the so-called Sudan Peace Act.

The Act, supported by a broad coalition of Christian Right groups, labor unions, and the Congressional Black Caucus, is designed to put pressure on the Arab-dominated National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Khartoum to end an 18-year war against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, a rebel group which has been fighting for self-determination for the mainly non-Muslim, African inhabi-

tants of the southern part of the country.

Administration officials insist they will still press Sudan and other abusive countries to clean up their acts.

But, by making counterterrorism the top priority in bilateral relations, the administration is effectively handing them cards that will trump other U.S. concerns—at least for the duration of Washington's new war.

(*Jim Lobe* <jlobe@starpower.net> and *Abid Aslam*

<aaslam@igc.org> are contributing editors for *Foreign Policy In Focus*, online at www.fpif.org.)

Who's Who in the Bush Administration

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler
Karen Hansen-Kuhn
Chris Hellman
Neil Hicks
Chris Toensing
Tomas Valasek
Carol Welch
Ian Williams

A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia
Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express
What Can We Expect from the Pentagon?
The Bush Administration and Human Rights
Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors
George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe
Republican Rule and the IFIs
The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush
And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick