September 11, 2002:

Understanding and

Defeating Terrorism,

One Year Later

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Shashi Tharoor delivered the following speech at the Virtue Foundation in New York City on September 11, 2002.

Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests,

It is hard to believe that a year has passed since the terrible events of September 11—events which forced every one of us to explore how to move forward in an increasingly uncertain world, and to reflect on our own commitment to end violent conflict at home and around the world.

The United Nations has struggled with terrorism almost since its inception. In 1948, its mediator in the Middle East—Count Folke Bernadotte—was assassinated by a terrorist group. And the Middle East question still features prominently on the agenda of our legislative bodies. But it would be wrong to suggest that it has been given the priority it deserves.

Twelve anti-terrorist treaties had been negotiated and had become part of the international legal regime prior to the start of the new millennium. Some were responses to terrorist acts, like the Maritime Safety Convention that was drawn up in response to the 1985 Achille Lauro cruise ship hijacking. Others,

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like the 1999 Convention on the Financing of Terrorism, aimed to nip the problem in the bud.

Terrorism—and the desire to end it—are not new. So we need to ask, before we start to develop a new strategy to confront terrorism, what is new?

Three things—two bad, one potentially good.

First, September 11 proved the direst predictions of UN terrorism experts and others correct. With modern technology, terrorist groups can plan, finance, and carry out much larger assaults and inflict massive loss of life and significant property damage using the very tools of globalization, from international jet travel to mobile phones. And that same technology has extended the reach of terrorists. Terrorist groups are now our neighbors—wherever we may live.

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Second, September 11 proved that no one is entirely safe from determined terrorists. Not even those inside the military command center of the world's sole remaining superpower.

Third—and here's the part that's potentially good—the universal shock and revulsion to the attacks of September 11 have united the world in a new determination to stamp out this scourge.

After September 11, there can be no easy retreat into isolationism, no comfort in the illusion that the problems of the rest of the world need not trouble the rich and tranquil. The world now understands viscerally the old cliché of the global village: 9/11 made it clear that a fire that starts in a remote thatched hut or dusty tent in one corner of the global village can melt the steel girders of the tallest skyscrapers in the opposite corner of that village.

Interdependence is now the watchword. The terrorist attack was an assault not just on two cities but also, in its callous indifference to the lives of innocents from more than 80 countries around the world, an assault on the very bonds of humanity that tie us all together. To respond to it effectively we must be united. Terrorism does not originate in one country, its practitioners are not based in one country, its victims are not found in one country—and the response to it must therefore involve all countries. Out of the solidarity that the world has demonstrated with the victims of this horror, a unity may yet emerge across borders that will also mark the new battle against terrorism as different from the ones that preceded it.

That's reassuring, because there are things that can be done.

Despite the lack of a consensus definition, there are some things we know about terrorism—things that can help us explore strategies to combat it.

International terrorism is a method rather than a political ideology. It has, at various times in the last hundred years, been used by the Right and the Left,

by subnational groups and internationalists, by secessionists and nation-builders—both successfully and unsuccessfully.

There are things we can do to help people understand that it is an unacceptable method. But if we are to succeed in combating terrorism, we must not mistake the method for the cause, or we run the risk of merely adding to the cadre of would-be martyrs.

For all but a few fanatics, it's a method born of weakness. Those with the capacity to achieve their political ambitions by more conventional means seldom feel the need to resort to terror. It's a technique of asymmetrical warfare—when you can't hit the enemy where he is strong, hit him where he is vulnerable.

Terrorism is unpredictable in its outcomes. Let's be realistic. It has sometimes furthered at least the short-term aims of its perpetrators. But it is a blunt and horrible weapon—and the more universally it is condemned, the more likely its use will inspire enmity against the very aims it serves, the less useful it will be as a method, and the less we need fear it.

Terrorist groups require a steady flow of new member-martyrs, as well as the support of nonterrorists, to survive. Support in terms of money or sanctuary from those sympathetic with their avowed political ambitions. Support from those who feel alienated from nonviolent means of political change. And support from those who live in fear of its perpetrators but are unable to successfully face them down.

Terrorism seldom thrives where alternative methods of redressing real or perceived ills exist, just as it seldom thrives where people feel comfortable about their prospects, or hopeful about their futures. Terrorism is bred from alienation and nurtured by hopelessness, deprivation, and the frustrations of those who feel powerless.

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While I do not agree with those who would offer simplistic explanations for the "root causes" of terrorism, there is no denying that the scourges of poverty, of famine, of illiteracy, of ill-health, of injustice, and of human insecurity contribute to the conditions in which terror is allowed to flourish.

Now that the world has resoundingly declared terrorism an enemy, all the weapons we have used to fight it are suddenly more powerful than they were on September 10, 2001. Warnings that seemed mere disguises for noble ambitions—the kinds of warnings the UN has been issuing for years—can no longer be easily dismissed.

So what must be done, and what can the UN do?

As the secretary-general said at a moving commemoration at the UN this

morning, "There could be no greater affront to the spirit and purpose of the United Nations than the terrorist attacks of 11 September. Everything that we work for—peace, development, health, freedom—is damaged by this horror. Everything that we believe in—respect for human life, justice, tolerance, pluralism and democracy—is threatened by it. It must be defeated—and it must be defeated by the world acting as one."[1]

I would like to suggest a three-pronged strategy for the international community to work to this end.

First, we must take steps against terrorist groups themselves. Second, our strategy must include measures to deny terrorists sanctuary. And third, we must act to deny terrorists legitimacy. The United Nations has a role to play in all three.

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When I say "we" must take steps against terrorists themselves, I'm not using the royal plural, or a rhetorical flourish.

Clearly national self-defense is a right in international law. The Security Council reaffirmed that right on September 12 last year in Resolution 1368. Equally as clear, many defensive measures will remain largely national responsibilities. That said, the sense of shared purpose that followed the attacks on the U.S. made it much harder for al-Qaeda terrorists to hide, and sorely limited the places they could run to. But that shared purpose could—and perhaps has—faded.

What is needed to maintain the sense of shared mission—across nations but also across cultures, religions, and ethnicities—is that elusive consensus definition. We must keep trying to find it. And the United Nations is the only forum from which a universally accepted definition can emerge. We all know where the difficulties lie, but we must keep trying until we succeed.

Muscular military responses to terrorism are unlikely to be undertaken by the United Nations. Recent history clearly demonstrates that the UN membership does not want its organization to function as an enforcer.

However, if states and coalitions can be encouraged to bring their plans for military responses to the Security Council, then the United Nations can serve the vital purpose of providing international legitimacy—when deserved—to their efforts. The council and the secretary-general have often acted as voices of reason and moderation in the face of domestic pressures on aggrieved states to overreact, and to provide some guarantee that the response is both justified and not in itself a threat to international peace and security.

Mechanisms to limit arms flows to terrorists and to freeze their financial assets need to be strengthened. Helpful, too, would be means to mediate those

disputes over jurisdiction that have, in the past, prevented suspected terrorists from being brought before courts. Thanks to its universal membership and moral authority, the United Nations is the best forum for strengthening these mechanisms. In many cases the necessary international instruments exist. In others, discussions have commenced in UN bodies. Existing treaties should be implemented, and those that are not yet open for signature should be completed.

And now to the second arm of our strategy. We must work to deny terrorists sanctuary. Without secure bases, terrorist groups would find it much harder to martial their resources and to institute the planning and training needed for large-scale destruction.

Terrorists find sanctuary in two different kinds of places. They find it in countries that are sympathetic to their political ambitions. We need political tools to discourage such states from providing succor to those committed to violence against civilians. Methods such as sanctions and restrictions on bilateral and multilateral cooperation are universally seen as legitimate. But they are much more effective if they are universal, and that means they should be authorized or imposed by the UN.

Terrorists also find sanctuary in states that don't have the capacity to confront them effectively. Outlaws have always hidden in the badlands. We need to expand the boundaries of the rule of law, by improving law enforcement and security apparatus in these states. The United Nations experience in developing national security capacities in the former Yugoslavia and now in East Timor, as well as its long-standing record of technical assistance programs, make it the best candidate for such nation-building activities.

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The third arm of an effective strategy is to address the multiple so-called "root causes" of terrorism. By using those words I do not mean to imply simple causality. The pilots who hijacked the planes on September 11 were not born of poverty. But they could not have acted without the support or at least the complicity of many others who shared their world-view and partook of their resentments. Tackling this is the hardest part of the battle we must win. Logic demands that measures be taken to reduce the flow not just of people and money, but also of moral support to terrorist organizations. Security measures alone may defeat a terrorist, but are unlikely to defeat terrorism.

Whatever the motives of the leaders of terrorist organizations, alone they pose little threat. Rather, they take advantage of desperate people.

We need to ask what leads surprisingly large numbers of young men—and

sometimes young women—to follow the desperate course set for them by fanatics and ideologues. Terrorism is not—and can never be—legitimate. But—without for a moment accepting its legitimacy—we need to understand how those who feel mired in despair, hopelessness, or rage may clutch at it, encourage it, and support it.

It is not surprising that young people raised in oppressive environments and offered little hope for just redress feel frustrated and angry. It's almost axiomatic that a sense of oppression, of exclusion, of marginalization, can give rise to resistance. More than a hundred years ago Clausewitz told us that war is politics by other means. Forty years ago, in 1962, then-Secretary-General U Thant warned that an explosion of violence could occur as a result of the sense of injustice felt by those living in poverty and despair in a world of plenty. Let's not forget that while more than 2,600 people died in New York on 9/11, more than 26,000 also died on 9/11 elsewhere in the world—of hunger, of unclean water, of preventable disease.

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We have to confront the sources of despair and alienation. Part of our strategy to address terrorism must be to address poverty, and we must continue to trumpet the nexus between security and development.

A related point: if a state cannot even offer its people hope for a better life for their children—by providing access to basic education—then how can we expect those people or those children to resist the blandishments of terror?

It should come as no surprise that the Taliban recruited its foot soldiers from the religious schools that were the only source of nurture and education—or indoctrination—for the many children who learned not science or mathematics or computer programming, but rather only the creed of the Koran and the Kalashnikov—the Koran crudely interpreted, the Kalashnikov crudely made.

Another way to eliminate frustration and anger—and the violence that may follow—is through supporting the growth of democracy and the rule of law. In democratic societies there are roadmaps for nonviolent dissent. Power relations between ethnic and religious groups and the state are mediated. Whilst not always perfect, there are mechanisms to obtain justice. And the system offers hope for change—and the means to change—without the need for violence.

The United Nations has long been at the forefront of the promulgation and promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights. We must place these core values even higher on our international agenda and reduce our tolerance for autocratic and arbitrary regimes even further. Just as we make the world a smaller

and less secure place for terrorism's pyromaniacs, we must make it a less friendly and less receptive place for those regimes that repress their citizens, and thereby fuel the fire. Of course, democracy, like love, must come from inside; it cannot be imposed from outside. But it can be encouraged and supported.

Another source of radicalized youth is interminable conflict. I don't need to name those conflicts that have hung like a millstone around the neck of the international community for far too many years. In some cases firm resolutions demanding just settlements are older than the majority of people trapped by the wars they have inherited. As I have said, terrorism can be a product of despair.

Finding just and stable solutions to long-standing conflicts must take precedence over short-term power politics.

The United Nations has a vital role to play in the search for solutions to these conflicts. This means insisting on the peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution that the organization was established to deliver. Finding just and stable solutions to long-standing conflicts must take precedence over short-term power politics. By finding solutions—and delivering on them—we will deprive would-be terrorists of their human capital, of their cannon fodder. And we will save lives in those parts of the world we think of as peaceful, as well as in those parts that have become synonymous with war.

And that's my submission for a three-pronged strategy for the United Nations. Based on peaceful resolution of conflict...on human rights...on justice and respect for the rule of law...and on social progress and greater freedom for all. If these phrases sound familiar, there's a good reason for it. When you have a moment, cast your eyes over what "we the peoples determined" in the preamble to the UN Charter.

More of the same, perhaps. More of the very principles and commitments enshrined in the charter. But now we have seen those graphic images—again and again—of the World Trade towers collapsing. Now we all know what only some countries have known. Now we all know the price of failure. ∎

NOTES

1 "No Greater Affront to Spirit of United Nations Than 11 September Terrorist Attacks Says Secretary-General to Commemoration at Headquarters," UN Press Release SG/SM/8376, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/sgsm8376.doc.htm> (accessed November 15, 2002).