

One year after '911'

– a world changed less than expected

By Steven Everts, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Reform

September 11th 2002 is getting close and the remembrance industry is gearing up for an explosion of 'one year after' pieces. Far too many of these will dwell on the theme that September 11th has changed the world in a fundamental and lasting sense. This view is seductive but mistaken. Upon closer inspection it is clear that the dominant characteristic of global politics today is continuity rather than change. Worse, political leaders have not seized the opportunities that clearly emerged in the wake of the attacks to re-energise co-operative international relations and put them on a firmer institutional footing.

The received wisdom on September 12th was that the attacks were a sea change, not just in the history of the US but also in the course of global politics. Because they took place in the world's most powerful country – and in front of so many TV cameras that beamed the images right across the world – it was natural for people to expect not a blip on the screen but a structural realignment of global politics. Politicians and analysts from across the world and the political spectrum, repeated in unison that '911' would have dramatic consequences in a variety of areas: the nature of the global agenda; the basic foreign policy stance of key international actors; and the ability of the 'international community' to find innovative solutions to pressing problems. There was a widespread sense that something positive could and should come out of the assaults on New York and Washington: a greater realisation that we live in a truly interdependent world calling for a new spirit of international co-operation.

Not for the first time, British Prime Minister Tony Blair managed to articulate the mood of the moment. In his speech to the Labour Party Conference last October he offered a genuinely inspiring image: 'The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux and soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.' But one year on, for most people and governments the world is pretty much the same. If anything, there is more discord and instability while the capacity of the international system to tackle these problems is still underwhelming.

Of course, 'catastrophic' terrorism has shot up the political agenda. But in most countries domestic politics 'rules'. Public debates centre on a broader and more elusive fear of 'insecurity' of which messianistic terrorism is only a small component, alongside traditional worries about the economic downturn, immigration and crime. Assessing the longer-term impact of September 11th one is struck by the scope and depth of continuity. Clearly, '911' has not really changed the world. Rather, it has accelerated pre-existing trends.

Take the US. Already before September 11th, the Bush administration was practising a strongly unilateral approach to foreign policy. In rhetoric and action, it was single-minded about pursuing US national interests. It showed little inclination to consult friends and allies – and even less to heed their advice. And it systematically sought to remove as many constraints as possible on US freedom of manoeuvre. To illustrate: before September 11th the Bush administration had already renounced no fewer than seven international treaties.

Contrary to the early, optimistic expectations, the broad thrust of US foreign policy has not changed. If anything the rapid collapse of the Taliban has tilted the balance within the administration further in favour of the hardliners such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney. Secretary of State Colin Powell, the voice of moderation that so many non-Americans applaud, has been sidelined. This victory of the Pentagon and the neo-conservatives is important. For the hawks love to stress the military superiority of the US, and link it to the conviction that America can afford to 'go it alone'. But they fail to examine how successful the US has really been in translating military dominance into real, on-the-ground progress in achieving US objectives.

It is not just that Osama Bin Laden is still missing. The deeper problem is that the US could have waged a more inclusive, multilateral and multi-faceted campaign (using both hard and soft security instruments). But it chose not to. This is more than a missed opportunity. To be successful in any war, particularly a war on terror, a government needs to win 'hearts and minds'. But sadly America has not really done that. Hence, the real risk that growing anti-US resentment is fuelling a new generation of terrorist operatives. It is clear that the new form of terrorism is fed by wells of hatred and disaffection throughout the Greater Middle East, factors that have created a Maoist 'sea' in which terrorists swim and hide. Disappointingly, the US has not rethought the bases and biases of its Middle East policy. This is not just typical European moaning: a senior Malaysian diplomat recently warned that the line up in the war on terror was becoming 'the US (plus Israel) against the rest'.

The Bush administration has also managed to use the September 11th attacks as proof that its long-standing policy ambitions were not only right all along, but are also the best answers to meet the challenges of a changed world. It has skilfully linked the 'War on Terror' to its pre-existing agenda of dealing with rogue states (Iraq, Iran, North Korea etc.). That was the point of Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech. Many Europeans thought that Bush had thus conflated two distinct problems: that of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist networks. Both are serious problems, but they are analytically distinct and require different policy responses.

Europe has equally changed little. The one area that has seen progress is not, as one might have expected EU foreign and security policy, but rather 'justice and home affairs' (which deals with immigration policy and police co-operation). The EU has moved rapidly to deeper integration on these issues. But again, this mainly involved an acceleration of pre-existing plans rather than a fundamental rethink of the Union's priorities. Moreover, the steps towards a common asylum and immigration policy, plus measures for stronger co-operation on a common external border guard, are more a response to the rise of the anti-immigrant right than an attempt to protect Europe from terrorist attacks.

Lots of discussions are taking place in the Convention on the Future of Europe about reforms to boost Europe's international influence. But the pace and scope of these debates are determined by intra-European considerations, and largely follow an agenda set before September 11th. The key questions in Europe today are the same as they have always been. What sort of Europe do we want? What should be its tasks and institutional structures? And what is the price, in terms of pooling sovereignty and transferring money, that countries are prepared to pay?

Regarding terrorism, European leaders continue to underline the importance of tackling the root causes of political extremism, of working through international organisations, and of keeping in step with global public opinion. But there has been no step change in equipping Europe's central institutions with the authority and instruments necessary for the EU to change world events in a proactive manner.

September 11th has confirmed that the world's gravest security threats are located in the Greater Middle East. The region is characterised by an explosive cocktail of on-going violence between Israelis and Palestinians; a worsening crisis of 'Arab state failure' (the failure to modernise their economies and open up political systems, boosting the attractiveness of Islamic fundamentalist groups); and attempts by those regimes that are often hostile to their neighbours, and others further afield, to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The world struggled with all three issues before September 11th – and is today not really closer

to solving any of them. Regarding Iraq, it is almost certain that the neo-conservatives would anyway have been pushing for a military campaign – just as much as Europeans, Arabs and others would have been sceptical if not opposed.

In Asia too, the watchword seems to be continuity rather than change. Rivalry between India and Pakistan is nothing new – all India has done is dress up a long-standing conflict over Kashmir as a ‘terrorist’ issue. Japan is still weighed down by political inertia, struggling to end its ‘lost decade’. And China remains firmly focused on economic modernisation with no change in either the objectives or the tactics of its foreign policy. Meanwhile, regional co-operation forums such as ASEAN remain institutionally weak, because distrust among the key countries remains strong. Africa and Latin America too seem hardly affected by a fall out from September 11th – their cycles of political instability and economic dislocation remain depressingly familiar.

Of course, some things have changed. The Taleban has been defeated and Al Qaeda is a much weaker force. Hamid Karzai is Afghanistan’s most enlightened ruler for decades. And co-operation among the world’s police authorities and intelligence services has stepped up leading to some notable successes in rounding up terrorist cells. True too, Russia is an even more ‘Western-leaning’ country – although President Putin was arguably moving in that direction anyway. Finally, policy analysts are agreed on the massive danger that ‘failed states’ can pose to global security - without this however leading to a concerted programme of action to prevent their collapse.

Crucially, those international institutions that could play a key role in promoting the kind of global restructuring that Tony Blair had evoked – the UN, IMF/World Bank, G-7, NATO and EU, and so on – have not emerged stronger. There is a compelling need for more robust multilateral governance. But one year after September 11th, the sobering conclusion must be that the world is a more fractious and troubled place – because the opportunity to reorganise the international system was not seized. Surely the victims of September 11th deserve a more fitting legacy.