

## **The 11 September 2001 terrorist attack and conflict prevention: The need to do more for prevention - not less**

The act of organised violence against nerve centres of the United States is first and foremost a capital crime, but must also be seen as part of a fundamental conflict between democratic forces and intolerant terrorist actors. Can such conflicts be prevented? How to understand the escalation? What is the most likely response? And what should be the consequences the EU will have to draw from a conflict prevention perspective? Following are preliminary answers to the above questions which are meant to add to the current debate and to deal – even during the present emotional phase – with the causes rather than mainly with the symptoms.

Conflict prevention remains pretty much a new paradigm that has made progress in international fora since the 1990s. The events of this Tuesday will have effects on this field of engagement that are not altogether clear at this moment.

### **Two radically different ways may open up:**

1. Conflict Prevention becomes more important and a „mainstream policy“ for all major national and international actors, essentially to prevent terrorist attacks and the damage associated with them.
2. Conflict Prevention disappears as a paradigm since old-fashioned revenge policies become the order of the day. All seemingly „soft“ approaches are discredited and get less attention.

Both outcomes seem possible today.

### **Can a coherent conflict prevention policy prevent terrorist attacks?**

Maybe only indirectly and in a complex way: Individual perpetrators of acts of violence may not be influenced by good arguments and convinced of „win-win solutions“ to their perceived problems. But terrorists act frequently on the basis of popular perceptions, they mingle with „ordinary“ people from specific groups and draw on their grievances. Therefore, coherence of different policies, e.g. external relations, development co-operation, security policy and justice and home affairs, is one of the main principles of an efficient conflict prevention policy – only a coherent approach can prove effective in the case of terrorism.

### **Does conflict analysis offer clues for understanding the newly created situation?**

Terrorist acts can be analysed with a conflict analysis approach. Assuming that the attacks of 11 September 2001 have been masterminded and implemented by a network of islamist terrorists, the following analytical terminology can be used:

The history of conflict in the Middle East and Central Asia needs to be reassessed as *background condition* to the conflict. Within this reassessment the motivation for violent behaviour need to be identified (one obvious *root-cause of violent conflict* being the *imbalance of*

*political, social, economic and cultural opportunities for different identity groups* – Israelis and Palestinians – in a given territorial setting). The range of *aggravating factors* and a series of *triggering events* need to be looked at. The different *stakeholders* inside each camp and their interests need to be *mapped out carefully*. The relevant *problem areas* need to be identified (like *violation of political group rights, biased law application and enforcement by justice and security services, weak or harming external engagement*). It needs to be assessed why the problem areas have not been efficiently addressed by activities of *local actors* and the *international community*.

Corresponding *conflict phases* need to be identified moving from phases of *unstable peace* to *high tension* with local, regional or international outbursts of *open conflict*. In this context the question remains: Were the attacks on New York and Washington themselves an act of war in the analytical sense (not in the legal sense)? Has the conflict escalated – globally – into an open conflict phase? Maybe not yet, but a US/NATO attack on Afghanistan will allow no doubt anymore that war is on. If this happens the conflict has definitely spilled beyond the geographical area of the United States and the Middle East/Central Asia. The EU will have to ask itself if this were not - despite a further high toll of casualties - just another „trigger“ for a much larger conflict that still can be prevented.

### **Preventing horizontal and vertical escalation of conflict**

The current situation is an extremely unstable one. In fact, observers around the world expect the US to react by military means to the attacks. The trouble is: there is no classical target for such a military action. Apparently, the terrorists came from different national backgrounds. Their common denominator: they were islamists. In the Western media, leading politicians are preparing involuntarily the ground for a much bigger confrontation: 1. „This was an attack on the civilised world“, 2. „NATO must act and show solidarity with the US“. While there is no doubt that practical solidarity is the order of the day, one should move carefully. The amalgamation is quickly done and an implicit message is sent: 3. „Only the NATO member states are civilised“. The consequences are already tangible: Non-European groups in the EU are perceived as being suspect – and as the police investigation in Hamburg and other European cities shows: there are, in fact, international terrorists living among us.

However, there is a real danger that a military blow, maybe simultaneously against targets in different states of the Islamic world, will lead to a solidarisation of large parts of the population in the Middle East and Central Asia - and of Muslim minorities within the EU - with the extremists, that is actually the main aim of the attack. We could easily face a *horizontal escalation* (terrorist acts all over the globe, violent rebellions against moderate Arab regimes in the Middle East) and a *vertical escalation* of violence in Palestine and Chechnya. Some Middle East states and some Central Asian Republics can be further driven by terrorism and anti-terrorist action of regional actors (the Israeli government, the Russian government). There are a variety of scenarios of escalation including the collapse of fragile oil emirates with devastating effects on the world economy that can not be extensively discussed here. One thing should be crystal clear: The clash of civilisation, an easy reading of a complex situation by an influential American writer, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **An EU conflict prevention policy in this context ...**

... is not aiming at quick and comprehensive solutions of a given security problem, but rather means to assist with reducing factors of escalation by

- *Creating fora for a constructive dialogue including appeals to responsibilities for global peace:* The EU should go on trying to mediate between the conflict parties in the Middle East, particularly because the US would not be able to fill in this role in the upcoming months. The responsibility for global peace must be shared with local actors; their responsibility needs to be stressed much more thoroughly than in the past.
- *Fostering Coherence between different policies/Thinking globally, acting locally:* The EU should watch over hate media globally (including at home), prevent „support frameworks“ for terrorists by controlling i.e. resource-flows, propaganda and military training involving Diaspora living in Europe, engage in short term conflict management and prepare for (and implement) long-term structural conflict prevention policies for the Middle East and Central Asia regions.
- *Acknowledging the complexities:* The EU should be more aware that conflicts in Central Asia (and Chechnya) or the Middle East are not just wars between „islamist terrorists“ and legitimate governments.
- *Working on the problem areas:* The EU should publicly acknowledge grievances of all major groups in the Middle East/Central Asia and look for constructive solutions of structural problems in the socio-economic and governance fields. The objective of such a structural conflict prevention is to exclude that political, social, environmental or economic conflicts could serve as a pretext for committing terrorist acts. In truly democratic societies any conflict can be settled through the channels provided by the political system based on the Constitution – there is no justification for the use of terrorist violence. A special emphasis of EU activity should therefore be put on building legitimate, inclusive and democratic institutions.
- *Sharing insights and policy analysis with US decision-makers:* The EU should express its concern about unintended escalatory consequences from early and massive military or commando action (which may be unavoidable) producing casualties among innocent sections of the population.

The EU should be prepared to answer the long existing, but now particularly manifest challenges by international terrorism for global peace with a coherent and reinforced conflict prevention approach.