May 4 2010

If 9-11 had Happened in the UK, would Bush have backed Blair?
LSE Ideas

By **Inderjeet Parmar**

A really interesting question that has a bearing on the character of the 'special relationship': had '9-11′ (which I guess would have been dubbed '11-9' by us or else required elaborate translation for American audiences) happened on British soil and involving just as many casualties, how would the United States have reacted to it? I am not talking about the immediate outpouring of shock and sympathy but what followed – a declaration by the US of a 'global war on terror', the war in Afghanistan and, later, and more controversially, war on Iraq. Would President George W. Bush have backed to the hilt whatever course of action Prime Minister Tony Blair decided upon?

That question was put to me by a 6th form student at a meeting I addressed recently. What a great question to ask – it blew me away! It had never occurred to me to ask it; nor had I ever heard it asked by any academic expert or journalist, let alone a politician. So much for the political apathy of British youth – they are interested in the world around them and do ask questions when given a chance. I just wish that that student's question – her name is Caitlin – had been put to the three party leaders during the second election debate, a 'debate' which failed to address any issues pertaining to Anglo-American relations.

Back to that great question, which has me scratching my head. My immediate response was that the US would NOT have backed Britain to the same extent that Britain backed the United States. Why? Because an attack on Britain, a middle-ranking power, would have been seen as a 'regional' question and not a global one (by the US). Attack America and you attack the world's 'regional' power – the lone superpower, the planet's policeman, and its financial centre. That 'demands' a massive retaliatory response. Attack Britain, and the world order gets a bloody nose but the world order does not go into a tailspin. And the lone superpower would probably play a restraining role so as not to exacerbate the situation.

That was my immediate response. But I did tell Caitlin that I would probably have a better answer a few hours later. But all I could do was think up further arguments to back my initial response. When had Britain been militarily engaged before and what had been the US response? Well, there was the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands back in 1982: President Ronald Reagan had had to choose between two US allies and decided to back Britain with intelligence and logistical support but did not commit military support (but was not asked to either). That did not change my initial response to the Big Question.

Then there was the British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt – the Suez 'incident'/crisis – in 1956, when the US forced the aggressors to back down. That also suggested that US support after a British '9-11' would not be automatic. (But id did remind me that the US is happy to take its opportunities to increase its own influence in world affairs when they present themselves).

And then there was WWII – the US did not enter until the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 – over two years after was was declared. That also backed up my initial response (the US sold arms and equipment to the UK, provided aid too, but also moved swiftly into British overseas markets across the world, especially in Latin America: again, 'natural' opportunism of the type most states would engage in).

But a doubt kept nagging away centring on one thought: that the first response of Bush's National Security Adviser, Condoleeza Rice, to the 9-11 attacks was to ask how the US could use the event to assert American power? And that Tony Blair's liberal interventionism – displayed in the Bosnia/Kosovo conflicts, Sierra Leone, support of greater US interventions and attacks on Iraq and the Sudan in the 1990s- would have been highly persuasive in Washington, DC, given the strength of voices such as Vice President Dick Cheney's, among others, not to mention the neo-cons so close to Bush. The 9-11 attacks gave a clarity of vision to US policymakers as well as their Democratic political opponents because they furnished the world's superpower with a clear and present danger, a plausible enemy, a 'global' threat, with which to replace the Soviet 'threat'.

Would US policymakers have permitted such a political opportunity to pass? Or would they have reacted in the way they actually did after 9-11? There is still the matter that robust US responses to an attack on British soil would need 'selling' to the American public. And also that, as Britain was the victim, it would have to be seen to be calling the shots, as it were, as to what to do and how to go about it. But I cannot imagine that Blair, viewing the US as a 'force for good in the world', would not have

urged America to flex its muscles, declare Anglo-America's moral superiority in a world of failing states and terrorist safe havens, and commit to a generations-long war on terror. And Blair's religiosity – there is 'good' and 'evil' in the world and the latter must be vanquished – would have played well in the White House.

Then I got to thinking about the Truman doctrine (1947) when the US president used Britain's inability to intervene in Greece to counter the Soviet 'threat' to declare that America was ready to support and defend 'free peoples' everywhere against 'armed minorities' and communist aggression.

It could well be, then, that had 9-11 been 11-9, the United States would have 'backed' Britain but with a view to re-legitimising and reasserting US global dominance. Maybe history would have turned out pretty much as it did after 9-11 but taking a slightly more circuitous route?

But I am still scratching my head. What a great question!

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