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NINE MONTHS AFTER 911: AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE WAR ON TERROR AT HOME AND ABROAD, INCLUDING SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Introduction

Between 4 and 24 June 2002, I had the opportunity to join six other Southeast Asian participants on a three-week Study Tour of the United States organized by the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation. The Tour was formally entitled "Current Issues in American Public Policy and Society: A Three-Week Study Tour for Emerging Southeast Asian Policy Leaders". It consisted essentially of study visits to four American cities beginning on the Pacific coast with San Francisco, California; then heading eastwards to first Des Moines, Iowa, then New York City and finally Washington, D.C. The Study Tour was organized as part of the Asia Foundation's wider "Broadening American Engagement with Southeast Asia Program", and was partially funded by the Freeman Foundation. Through facilitating dialogue between Southeast Asian program participants and a cross-section of American society including policymakers, civil society activists, media and business interests, the Tour sought to give participants a "sense of the views, values, and concerns of the American people", while enabling "American policymakers to become acquainted with emerging Southeast Asian leaders and be introduced to Southeast Asian concerns and perspectives". As expected, the "911" incident cast a long shadow over our discussions during the three weeks. The purpose of this commentary is to offer a personal perspective on how Americans of different backgrounds appeared to have been affected by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and the ways in which the "911" effect has apparently influenced US perceptions of certain key issues. It must be offered as a caveat that the views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the consensus of the Southeast Asian "Fellows". They are largely based on my own assessments. In essence, the discussions during the course of the Study Tour threw out four broad themes:

The Post-911 Mass Media, Terrorism and Islam

It was pointed out by a young New York-based journalist that because most of the headquarters of the national print and broadcast media were in New York City, all the editors were directly and personally affected by 911, and this naturally ensured that the terrorist strikes were exhaustively covered in the news. The young journalist candidly admitted that the world was now being viewed by the American media through the "prism of 911", and that there was now "only one story: Islamist terrorism", and this would ensure increased coverage of the world of Islam. He acknowledged that apart from China, American media coverage of Southeast Asia pre-911 had been "quaint", "simplistic" and frankly belonged to the – as he put it - "Gee, did you know there is a country called

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Cambodia?" category of journalism. While this was changing, he worried that Southeast Asia would be regarded merely as source of radical Islamic terrorism.

Moreover, other US media analysts observed that the current structure of the mass media in America did not necessarily promote nuanced and balanced understanding of the issues pertaining to the war on terror and Islam. There were three reasons for this. First was the proliferation of "lenses" with which Americans view the world. Instead of the evening news broadcasts by the three major news networks of the past, today Americans were bombarded by 24-hour saturation cable television coverage by the likes of *CNN, CNBC, MSNBC and Fox News*. Together with talk radio – controlled by conservative political voices - and the Internet, cable news channels today dominated the media environment. Thus the average American consumer was "bombarded" by what one senior media analyst called "factoids" – that is, not facts per se but rather facts marshaled in certain ways by journalists seeking to advance a particular worldview. Second, media analysts expressed concern at the consolidation of the American mass media around an ever-smaller number of major players such as *AOL*, *Disney* and *Dow Jones*. This situation not only tended to undermine journalistic objectivity but a smaller number of media empires owning all the news outlets implied correspondingly *fewer* alternative perspectives on the world.

Third, because of budget cutbacks and rising costs, the ability of networks to maintain qualified and knowledgeable reporters abroad had steadily diminished. Hence the typical pattern today was for networks to position several relatively inexperienced (and hence cheaper to maintain) reporters in say, London as a hub from which to report on nearby countries that they have very little knowledge of. In this vein, the young New York journalist admitted that knowledge of Southeast Asia was rather sketchy even amongst foreign newspaper editors. He recalled how he once had had a heated argument with a foreign editor of a global newspaper who insisted that Brunei was located in the Persian Gulf! The dearth of knowledgeable journalism on radical Islamic terrorism in particular and Islam more generally was complemented by a similar lacuna in American academia. In this connection, a Professor of Political Science at UC Berkeley explained that there had been a decline in area studies expertise for a long time. He noted that the US academic system today tended to reward theory construction – promoting a climate in which there was a "love of ideas for the sake of ideas". This tended to result in the production of academics who were very good at "theoretical musings" but with little knowledge of "the street level". Still, it was noted that the US media was trying to be more balanced in its portrayal of Islam.

Civil Liberties, Racial-Religious Profiling and Muslims in America

The 911 attacks had also prompted a considerable deal of collective soul-searching about the balance between protecting civil liberties and preserving national security. Much of the debate revolved around the rapid passage in late October 2001 of the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (Patriot) Act. In the words of one New York civil liberties NGO, to "an unprecedented degree, the Act sacrifices our political freedoms in the name of national security and upsets the democratic values that define our nation by consolidating vast new powers in the executive branch of government", while at the same time insulating "the exercise of these powers from meaningful judicial and Congressional oversight". One important corollary of the civil liberties-national security debate was the racial-religious

profiling issue. Unsurprisingly 911 and the consequent upsurge in racial-religious profiling had had the biggest impact on Muslims in America. A spokesman for the leading American Muslim NGO noted that the Patriot Act had impacted Muslims more than any other community in the US and worried that this "selective application of the law" showed that Muslims were being equated in the official mind with terrorists. He claimed that not just Muslim non-citizens but even Muslim American *citizens* were singled out after 911. The spokesman reported that before 911, Muslims faced discrimination mainly in employment issues. But after 911, "everything changed": from having to handle on average about 600 complaints by Muslim Americans a year before the September strikes, his NGO had received 1 800 in the first nine months of 2002. In fact it was asserted by activists that the Muslim American community had been "traumatized" and "scared" and that many Muslim Americans had decided to "lay low" and "stay out of trouble". Another way in which racial-religious and especially Muslim profiling had been evidenced was in the realm of higher education. There was now a debate as to whether some areas of higher technical education should be made off-limits to foreign students, especially from Arab-Muslim countries. As one US Senator was said to have put it: "I don't want UC Berkeley to train the next nuclear engineer for Iraq".

American Unilateralism and Perceptions of the Middle East and Southeast Asia

American analysts felt that despite its periodic exhortations to Americans to live their lives as routinely as possible, the Bush administration did *not* really want the people to feel *too* secure. In fact it was suggested that the administration was deliberately manipulating the terror threat in order to ensure that interest in and support for the President's anti-terror policy remained high. Indeed Washington think tank analysts confirmed – not surprisingly - that counter-terrorism was a "policy fixation" within the administration. In addition, staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific asserted that the major focus on Capitol Hill was the war on terror, and that this had displaced more traditional concerns with human rights and democratization. On the issue of overall anti-terror policy and strategy, media analysts felt that Rumsfeld came across in the public debate as more "fun" and "credible" than Powell, who seemed to be tagged in the public eye as always adopting the minority position, having much of his assertions contradicted by the White House. In this connection a UC Berkeley professor agreed that the key foreign policy drivers now were Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and the "ideologues" who "inhabit Massachusetts Avenue" in Washington D.C. and who tended to see conflict as an "abstraction" and proffer "simplistic notions" of what the world could be.

One manifestation of the dominant, "simplistic" black-and-white worldview was the current unilateralist trend in American foreign policy. In fact a staff member on the House Subcommittee conceded that at the moment building coalitions was not seen as very important in American policy circles; while there have been debates about the proper use of American power, the general feeling was that America should use coalitions if necessary but go it alone if the need arose. The Fellows were even told by one staff during the meeting with the House Subcommittee that in his view a "Pax Americana" was far more preferable than a Chinese or Japanese one, and that the rest of the world ought to be able to see that. Moreover, with respect to Iraq, "many people feel" that Bush was out to finish Saddam and complete what his father had failed to do in 1991. On this issue of finishing off Saddam, a staff member on the House Subcommittee noted that while

Congress agreed with the administration's aim of effecting regime transformation in Iraq, it wanted to attain this by "means short of war".

It was widely affirmed that Southeast Asia after 911 had received a great deal of attention amongst media and policy people. In fact a Defence Department official informed the Fellows that Wolfowitz recently told an Indonesian official that there was no longer any need to convince people of the importance of the Southeast Asia to the US. However, it was clear that Southeast Asia, like the Middle East, was only being seen through the "prism of 911", and a George Washington University academic predicted that American interest in Southeast Asia would last only as long as the terror threat was perceived to emanate from the region. In this respect a senior State Department official told the Fellows that the administration was worried that certain Southeast Asian governments through "benign neglect" were unwittingly allowing parts of their territories to be turned into enclaves where "truly violent groups can learn their trade and practise it". Interestingly, the Defence Department official asserted that Southeast Asia was also important for the role it might play in helping shape the "battle for the direction of Islam" worldwide.

US Business Perceptions of the American Economy and the Relative Economic Strengths/Weaknesses of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia Post-911

New York-based economists told the Fellows that it would take another two to three years for a full US economic recovery post-911 because of sluggish consumer sentiment and excess capacity in the technology sector. Nevertheless, the post-911 war on terror implied that one could expect a stimulation of economic activity through a multi-year "ramp-up" of defence spending. However, an American invasion of Iraq would introduce uncertainty. While the defence sector would receive a boost, oil prices would surely spike, meaning that business and consumer costs would go up too. It was suggested that on balance an Iraqi invasion would exert a negative pressure on growth; however, a strongly growing US economy would be better able to "weather" the fallout of an invasion. With respect to the relative economic strengths and weaknesses of Southeast Asia in comparison to China, it was observed by a US Chamber of Commerce official that as China moved to implement WTO obligations, the amount of FDI going there was going to be "staggering", amounting to 50-60 percent of total FDI, mainly from US investors. In fact a New York hedge fund investor characterized China as a "huge engine pulling in capital and resources". For her part, a Columbia University professor, a specialist on the WTO and Northeast Asian economic affairs, admitted that she was "impressed" with China's willingness to educate judges, implement reforms and institute judicial review of administrative actions in line with WTO requirements as the country transitioned into a rule-based economy. She reckoned that, despite Beijing's problems, Chinese officials were on balance "sincere" and "doing remarkable things" in pushing ahead in its attempt to integrate into the world economy.

In contrast, American investors perceived Southeast Asia only as a *potential* 500 million-strong market at this point due to the significant differences in levels of economic development and governance standards amongst the countries in the region. As one analyst put it: "Singapore is not Cambodia". It was argued that to fully realize ASEAN's undoubted potential, there should really be only one stock market in the region and there ought to be faster and greater intra-regional economic integration, and even a common currency. On the issue of good governance, moreover, Southeast Asia did not compare

very well with China in the eyes of American investors. It was observed that one big problem was that there was no history and culture of bankruptcy in Southeast Asia, so that bankruptcy laws were in fact "meaningless". While some progress had been made in implementing a truly rule-based regulatory regime throughout Southeast Asia, progress had been too slow. In contrast to the lackadaisical pace of reform in Southeast Asia, US investors "noted" the Chinese "SEC people" enthusiastically learning from the world about best practices, and were drawing the appropriate conclusions. Hence there were less technical assistance and legal training programmes with Southeast Asia than with China, because "investment trends" were all pointing north "where the money is". One hedge fund investor also noted that Southeast Asian countries had to invest much more in human capital across-the-board and at every level. He pointed out that competition was tough as India turned out 80 000 and China 200 000 top quality engineers every year. In contrast in Indonesia for example the education system did not capture and develop the potential of every child – hence only a relatively "few survivors" made it through to higher education. If Southeast Asia was to compete with China, developing every last bit of intellectual capital was critical.

On the brighter side, the Fellows were told that 911 had convinced the Bush administration that Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines could not be permitted to go under. He added that in the near term "foreign appetite" was high, and investors were "getting excited" about the Thai and Indonesian bond markets. In addition, a senior Chamber of Commerce official opined that too rigid a notion of zero-sum economic competition between China and ASEAN was "too simplistic" for two reasons. First, it was always possible for ASEAN economies to restructure so as to specialize in sectors in which they enjoyed comparative advantages over the Chinese. Second, one should not forget that Korean GDP grew because of exports to China. Thus, China may also be seen as an "attractive export market" for ASEAN and an "alternative" to the Japanese and US markets. In this context the Columbia professor asserted that she was "astonished" that China wants to push an FTA with ASEAN. In general it was actually possible to discern an undercurrent of concern amongst some American business people about the potential for an ASEAN-China FTA.

In sum, it was apparent that what was of paramount interest to US investors in the post-911 climate was the ability of Southeast Asian governments to ensure a secure business environment. In this respect, there appeared to be genuine consternation that a terrorist plot had been uncovered *even* in Singapore, which appeared to have a reputation in the US as a "controlled state". The implication here was that if even tightly policed Singapore was not immune to terrorist infiltration, what more the rest of the region? It was also mentioned that the US business community was particularly concerned about container security at the Port of Singapore.