

The Strategic Challenge for the Next President (that no one is talking about)

By the time the 2008 elections roll around, it will have been more than 7 years since the attacks of 9/11, but al Qaeda will remain a major issue in that race. Barack Obama recently said that he would invade the sovereign state, important US ally, and nuclear power of Pakistan if that is what it took to defeat al Qaeda. Rudy Giuliani said that he would not take that option off the table. The debate over Iraq is largely a debate about al Qaeda – the leading Republican candidates believe that we must stay in Iraq in order to fight al Qaeda there, while the leading Democrats believe we should exit Iraq in order to focus on fighting al Qaeda in more pressing areas such as Afghanistan (and Pakistan). Al Qaeda is central to every leading candidate's plans for military and foreign policy. This will be a grave mistake for whoever ascends to the office of the President in 2009.

Al Qaeda is, of course, a deadly threat to Americans, American property, and American interests. They have a professed desire to kill Americans, destroy American property, and to thwart American objectives wherever they are found. Whether they are as capable of following through on these desires as they were at the beginning of the decade is debatable. What is not debatable is that they are not a strategic threat to the United States.

The United States has genuine, strategic interests in the Greater Middle East. Primary among these interests is the need to ensure the free flow of the region's energy resources to the productive centers of the world economy. A decade ago, Geoffrey Kemp and Robert Harkavy identified a "Strategic Energy Ellipse." Stretching from Russia at the northern end of the Caspian Sea to Oman at the southern terminus of the Persian Gulf, the SEE contains approximately 70% of the world's proven crude oil reserves and about 40% of the worldwide supply of natural gas. Al Qaeda is an operational threat to that flow – they can attack oil tankers, cut pipelines, and blow up refineries – and as such, they merit consideration and concern. The major strategic threats in the region, though, have been and will remain Iranian and Russian bids for regional hegemony. If either nation – or an alliance between them - is successful in their goals, they will control the most important energy producing region in the world and with it, the ability to dominate the world economy. In this latest iteration of the old Great Game, Russia and Iran are King and Queen; al Qaeda, its affiliates and other terror groups mere pawns.

Fortunately, the United States is remains in a strong position in this game. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, US military planners aggressively pursued arrangements with nations throughout the region with the result that today there is

a network of nations already in place who cooperate with Americans on a wide array of military matters. This informal network can be formalized into a true alliance that would serve to (a) contain Iran and (b) block Russia. Doing so will require, as Dr. W. Andrew Terrill urges, finally “treating allies as allies in the Arab world.” Most of all, it will require a President and a foreign policy team willing to move beyond the politically efficacious boogeyman of al Qaeda toward thinking – and speaking -deeply and strategically about the real long term interests and threats in the region.

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