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We Can Beat Terror at Its Own Game

Was Sept. 11 George Bush's fault? Or Bill Clinton's? Or the CIA's? The desire for a scapegoat obscures a larger and more important point. The principal culprit in not preventing the Al Qaeda attacks wasn't a person or an administration; it was a mind-set.

U.S. policymakers still employ a Cold War perspective in which the world is perceived primarily as a collection of nations. Much planning goes into evaluating what kinds of threats one nation poses to another and what kinds of military and diplomatic measures might neutralize those threats. But the world is no longer organized just around states. We live also in a world of networks: of corporations, of nongovernmental organizations, of criminals, of government officials. Terrorism is the ultimate networked threat. It demands a networked response.

A network is a decentralized, informal and flexible form of organization, with regular interactions among its members. In a world of instant information and rapid transport, networks offer global reach. Criminals in Russia can launder money in the Bahamas and direct drug smuggling from Afghanistan to New York; corporations based in Chicago can direct the production of goods in India and market them throughout Africa and Asia; anti-globalization activists from Austria to Australia can organize demonstrations in Seattle.

Al Qaeda is an absolutely classic network, composed of many loosely connected terrorist groups that share a common ideology and share methods and training. If it is driven out of one country, it can just pop up in another, making it almost impossible to fight without a globally coordinated response.

So, how can nations react to these networks? With networks of their own. An effective response to terrorism or crime requires that countries work together to establish global or regional networks of financial regulators, prosecutors, criminal investigators, immigration officials, transport officials and customs agents. The networks must be given specific mandates, and members must be encouraged by their countries to work cooperatively with all other members. Government officials from as many different countries as possible must join in a common fight. Richard Clarke, the former White House counter-terrorism czar, had some good ideas and brought together all the relevant officials within the U.S. in his interagency group, but he was unable to focus the White House on the need to go global with the same approach.

These government networks could be created both through rethinking existing multilateral institutions and creating new ones that are better adapted to 21st century realities. One way to cut off terrorist financing, for instance, would involve having the G-20 -- a network of finance ministers and central bank governors from 20 of the most important economies in the world, including some from the Middle East and South Asia -- develop and implement a joint plan for

monitoring, sharing information and eventually interrupting the flow of money to terrorist organizations.

Such an action is not unprecedented. The G-7, composed of the heads of state of the world's major industrialized democracies, created the Financial Action Task Force, a smaller network of financial regulators, to address money laundering and terrorist financing more than a decade ago, but it could be expanded and formalized under the umbrella of the G-20 nations as a major weapon in the war on terrorism.

A similar network of justice ministers in key countries around the world would also be useful. The Bush administration created the International Competition Network as a network of antitrust regulators designed to coordinate and improve international enforcement of antitrust laws. Why not pursue the same strategy with criminal laws, particularly those aimed at bringing terrorists to justice? A network of judges from around the world experienced in trying terrorist cases could be established, to share information and make suggestions to nations about how to reconcile the competing demands of national security and civil liberties when dealing with terrorism.

This approach lacks the superficial clarity and simplicity of a call to arms against enemy states like Afghanistan and Iraq. It would accomplish its goals with bureaucrats rather than bullets, and it would require us to build up rather than tear down. It would be a deeply cooperative approach that would both require and foster a sense of common purpose among nations in response to a common threat.

Using government networks as a key component in a global strategy to fight terrorism could lay the groundwork for an even broader approach to global governance. Terrorism is only one of a host of problems -- from global warming to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction -- that require global solutions. Yet developing a centralized capacity to address those problems -- the equivalent of world government -- is neither desirable nor politically feasible.

A far better approach is to tie together the existing government resources of various nations through government networks, following the lead of corporations, nongovernmental organizations, even, unfortunately, criminals -- all of whom have found networks to be the ideal organizational form for operating in a globalized world. These entities can work alongside or even within existing international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and even the World Trade Organization, enhancing their effectiveness and helping them adapt to a world very different from the one for which they were created.

Many international networks already exist, among regulators, judges, even legislators. But they are partial, informal and underutilized. In designing a creative, cooperative and effective strategy to address the most pressing threat to its national security, the U.S. can both learn from and ultimately reverse its recent mistakes -- mistakes that are rapidly making us the world's most hated country. By building government networks in ways that will provide incentives for as many governments as possible to join and cooperate with one another, the U.S. has the opportunity once again to lead the world, rather than trying to rule it.