By George Friedman

It has now been nine years since al Qaeda attacked the United States. It has been nine years in which the primary focus of the United States has been on the Islamic world. In addition to a massive investment in homeland security, the United States has engaged in two multi-year, multi-divisional wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, inserted forces in other countries in smaller operations and conducted a global covert campaign against al Qaeda and other radical jihadist groups.

In order to understand the last nine years you must understand the first 24 hours of the war — and recall your own feelings in those 24 hours. First, the attack was a shock, its audaciousness frightening. Second, we did not know what was coming next. The attack had destroyed the right to complacent assumptions. Were there other cells standing by in the United States? Did they have capabilities even more substantial than what they showed on Sept. 11? Could they be detected and stopped? Any American not frightened on Sept. 12 was not in touch with reality. Many who are now claiming that the United States overreacted are forgetting their own sense of panic. We are all calm and collected nine years after.

At the root of all of this was a profound lack of understanding of al Qaeda, particularly its capabilities and intentions. Since we did not know what was possible, our only prudent course was to prepare for the worst. That is what the Bush administration did. Nothing symbolized this more than the fear that al Qaeda had acquired nuclear weapons and that they would use them against the United States. The evidence was minimal, but the consequences would be overwhelming. Bush crafted a strategy based on the worst-case scenario.

Bush was the victim of a decade of failure in the intelligence community to understand what al Qaeda was and wasn't. I am not merely talking about the failure to predict the 9/11 attack. Regardless of assertions afterwards, the intelligence community provided only vague warnings that lacked the kind of specificity that makes for actionable intelligence. To a certain degree, this is understandable. Al Qaeda learned from Soviet, Saudi, Pakistani and American intelligence during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and knew how to launch attacks without tipping off the target. The greatest failure of American intelligence was not the lack of a clear warning about 9/11 but the lack, on Sept. 12, of a clear picture of al Qaeda's global structure, capabilities, weaknesses and intentions. Without such information, implementing U.S. policy was like piloting an airplane with faulty instruments in a snowstorm at night.

The president had to do three things: First, he had to assure the public that he knew what he was doing. Second, he had to do something that appeared decisive. Third, he had to gear up an intelligence and security apparatus to tell him what the threats actually were and what he ought to do. American policy became ready, fire, aim.

In looking back at the past nine years, two conclusions can be drawn: There were no more large-scale attacks on the United States by militant Islamists, and the United States was left with the legacy of responses that took place in the first two years after 9/11. This legacy is no longer useful, if it ever was, to the primary mission of defeating al Qaeda, and it represents an effort that is retrospectively out of proportion to the threat.

If I had been told on Sept.12, 2001, that the attack the day before would be the last major attack for at least nine years, I would not have believed it. In looking at the complexity of the security and execution of the 9/11 attack, I would have assumed that an organization capable of acting once in such a way could act again even more effectively. My assumption was wrong. Al Qaeda did not have the resources to mount other operations, and the U.S. response, in many ways clumsy and misguided and in other ways clever and targeted, disrupted any preparations in which al Qaeda might have been engaged to conduct follow-on attacks.

Knowing that about al Qaeda in 2001 was impossible. Knowing which operations were helpful in the effort to block them was impossible, in the context of what Americans knew in the first years after the war began. Therefore, Washington wound up in the contradictory situation in which American military and covert operations surged while new attacks failed to materialize. This created a massive political problem. Rather than appearing to be the cause for the lack of attacks, U.S. military operations were perceived by many as being unnecessary or actually increasing the threat of attack. Even in hindsight, aligning U.S. actions with the apparent outcome is difficult and controversial. But still we know two things: It has been nine years since Sept. 11, 2001, and the war goes on.

What happened was that an act of terrorism was allowed to redefine U.S. grand strategy. The United States operates with a grand strategy derived from the British strategy in Europe — maintaining the balance of power. For the United Kingdom, maintaining the balance of power in Europe protected any one power from emerging that could unite Europe and build a fleet to invade the United Kingdom or block its access to its empire. British strategy was to help create coalitions to block emerging hegemons such as Spain, France or Germany. Using overt and covert means, the United Kingdom aimed to ensure that no hegemonic power could emerge.

The Americans inherited that grand strategy from the British but elevated it to a global rather than regional level. Having blocked the Soviet Union from hegemony over Europe and Asia, the United States proceeded with a strategy whose goal, like that of the United Kingdom, was to nip potential regional hegemons in the bud. The U.S. war with Iraq in 1990-91 and the war with Serbia/Yugoslavia in 1999 were examples of this strategy. It involved coalition warfare, shifting America's weight from side to side and using minimal force to disrupt the plans of regional aspirants to gain power. This U.S. strategy also was cloaked in the ideology of global liberalism and human rights.

The key to this strategy was its global nature. The emergence of a hegemonic contender that could challenge the United States globally, as the Soviet Union had done, was the worst-case scenario. Therefore, the containment of emerging powers wherever they might emerge was the centerpiece of American balance-of-power strategy.

The most significant effect of 9/11 was that it knocked the United States off its strategy. Rather than adapting its standing global strategy to better address the counterterrorism issue, the United States became obsessed with a single region, the area between the Mediterranean and the Hindu Kush. Within that region, the United States operated with a balance-of-power strategy. It played off all of the nations in the region against each other. It did the same with ethnic and religious groups throughout the region and particularly within Iraq and Afghanistan, the main theaters of the war. In both cases, the United States sought to take advantage of internal divisions, shifting its support in various directions to create a balance of power. That, in the end, was what the surge strategy was all about.

The American obsession with this region in the wake of 9/11 is understandable. Nine years later, with no clear end in sight, the question is whether this continued focus is strategically rational for the United States. Given the uncertainties of the first few years, obsession and uncertainty are understandable, but as a long-term U.S. strategy — the long war that the U.S. Department of Defense is preparing for — it leaves the rest of the world uncovered.

Consider that the Russians have used the American absorption in this region as a window of opportunity to work to reconstruct their geopolitical position. When Russia went to war with Georgia in 2008, an American ally, the United States did not have the forces with which to make a prudent intervention. Similarly, the Chinese have had a degree of freedom of action they could not have expected to enjoy prior to 9/11. The single most important result of 9/11 was that it shifted the United States from a global stance to a regional one, allowing other powers to take advantage of this focus to create significant potential challenges to the United States.

One can make the case, as I have, that whatever the origin of the Iraq war, remaining in Iraq to contain Iran is necessary. It is difficult to make a similar case for Afghanistan. Its strategic interest to the United States is minimal. The only justification for the war is that al Qaeda launched its attacks on the United States from Afghanistan. But that justification is no longer valid. Al Qaeda can launch attacks from Yemen or other countries. The fact that Afghanistan was the base from which the attacks were launched does not mean that al Qaeda depends on Afghanistan to launch attacks. And given that the apex leadership of al Qaeda has not launched attacks in a while, the question is whether al Qaeda is capable of launching such attacks any longer. In any case, managing al Qaeda today does not require nation building in Afghanistan.

But let me state a more radical thesis: The threat of terrorism cannot become the singular focus of the United States. Let me push it further: The United States cannot subordinate its grand strategy to simply fighting terrorism even if there will be occasional terrorist attacks on the United States. Three thousand people died in the 9/11 attack. That is a tragedy, but in a nation of over 300 million, 3,000 deaths cannot be permitted to define the totality of national strategy. Certainly, resources must be devoted to combating the threat and, to the extent possible, disrupting it. But it must also be recognized that terrorism cannot always be blocked, that terrorist attacks will occur and that the world's only global power cannot be captive to this single threat.

The initial response was understandable and necessary. The United States must continue its intelligence gathering and covert operations against militant Islamists throughout the world. The

intelligence failures of the 1990s must not be repeated. But waging a multi-divisional war in Afghanistan makes no strategic sense. The balance-of-power strategy must be used. Pakistan will intervene and discover the Russians and Iranians. The great game will continue. As for Iran, regional counters must be supported at limited cost to the United States. The United States should not be patrolling the far reaches of the region. It should be supporting a balance of power among the native powers of the region.

The United States is a global power and, as such, it must have a global view. It has interests and challenges beyond this region and certainly beyond Afghanistan. The issue there is not whether the United States can or can't win, however that is defined. The issue is whether it is worth the effort considering what is going on in the rest of the world. Gen. David Petraeus cast the war in terms of whether the United States can win it. That's reasonable; he's the commander. But American strategy has to ask another question: What does the United States lose elsewhere while it focuses on the future of Kandahar?

The 9/11 attack shocked the United States and made counterterrorism the centerpiece of American foreign policy. That is too narrow a basis on which to base U.S. foreign policy. It is certainly an important strand of that policy, and it must be addressed, but it should be addressed through the regional balance of power. It is the good fortune of the United States that the Islamic world is torn by internal rivalries.

This is not dismissing the threat of terror. It is recognizing that the United States has done well in suppressing it over the past nine years but at a cost in other regions, a cost that can't be sustained indefinitely and a cost that could well result in challenges more threatening than a rising Islamist militancy. The United States must now settle into a long-term strategy of managing terrorism as best as it can while not neglecting the rest of its interests.

After nine years, the issue is not what to do in Afghanistan but how the global power can return to managing all of its global interests, along with the war on al Qaeda.

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