

September 11 and global security

Events: On the morning of 11 September 2001, a coordinated series of terrorist attacks were launched against the USA using four hijacked passenger jet airliners (the events subsequently became known as September 11, or 9/11). Two airliners crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, leading to the collapse first of the North Tower and then the South Tower. The third airliner crashed into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the Department of Defence in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington DC. The fourth airliner, believed to be heading towards either the White House or the US Capitol, both in Washington DC, crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers on board tried to seize control of the plane. There were no survivors from any of the flights. A total of 2,995 people were killed in these attacks, mainly in New York City. In a videotape released in October 2001, responsibility for the attacks was claimed by Osama bin Laden, head of the al-Qaeda (see p. 301) organization, who praised his followers as the 'vanguards of Islam'.



Significance: September 11 has sometimes been described as 'the day the world changed'. This certainly applied in terms of its consequences, notably the unfolding 'war on terror' and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and their ramifications. It also marked a dramatic shift in global security, signalling the end of a period during which globalization and the cessation of superpower rivalry appeared to have been associated with a diminishing propensity for international conflict. Globalization, indeed, appeared to have ushered in new security threats and new forms of conflict. For example, 9/11 demonstrated how fragile national borders had become in a technological age. If the world's greatest power could be dealt such a devastating blow to its largest city and its national capital, what chance did other states have? Further, the 'external' threat in this case came not from another state, but from a terrorist organization, and one, moreover, that operated more as a global network than a nationally-based organization. The motivations behind the attacks were also not conventional ones. Instead of seeking to conquer territory or acquire control over resources, the 9/11 attacks were carried out in the name of a religiously-inspired ideology, militant Islamism (see p. 205), and aimed at exerting a symbolic, even psychic, blow against the cultural, political and ideological domination of the West. This led some to see 9/11 as evidence of an emerging 'clash of civilization'

(see p. 196), even as a struggle between Islam and the West.

However, rather than marking the beginning of a new era in global security, 9/11 may have indicated more a return to 'business as normal'. In particular, the advent of a globalized world appeared to underline the vital importance of 'national' security, rather than 'international' or 'global' security. The emergence of new security challenges, and especially transnational terrorism, re-emphasized the core role of the state in protecting its citizens from external attack. Instead of becoming progressively less important, 9/11 gave the state a renewed significance. The USA, for example, responded to 9/11 by undertaking a substantial build-up of state power, both at home (through strengthened 'homeland security') and abroad (through increased military spending and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq). A unilateralist tendency also became more pronounced in its foreign policy, as the USA became, for a period at least, less concerned about working with or through international organizations of various kinds. Other states affected by terrorism have also exhibited similar tendencies, marking a renewed emphasis on national security sometimes at the expense of considerations such as civil liberties and political freedom. In other words, 9/11 may demonstrate that state-based power politics is alive and kicking.