The events of September 11th 2001 demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion possible the extent of global interdependence in security terms. No country however prosperous or apparently secure can remain isolated from the impact of instability and insecurity elsewhere.

However, September 11th and subsequent US-led action against Afghanistan and Al-Qa’ida has also highlighted some of the limitations of existing security policies and the existing security paradigm. This is particularly true of the policies of the United States, but it has implications, too, for the policy of the UK, given the very close relationship that has been established between the Blair government and the Bush administration.

Even before the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, President Bush had adopted a much more unilateralist approach to foreign affairs and defence policy than that of his predecessor, President Clinton. In respect of foreign policy, this was reflected in the US’s refusal to sign the Kyoto agreement on climate change and its opposition to the International Criminal Court. On defence and security matters, the administration made clear from the outset that it would not remain bound by the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, intent as it was on introducing a National Missile Defence system. The Bush administration also moved to increase defence spending and to strengthen the US’s capacity for force projection around the world, and it adopted a tougher diplomatic line on so-called rogue states like North Korea and Iran.

The attacks of September 11th were profoundly shocking to the US political and defence establishment. They opened up some debate about security policy options and about how US security interests should best be protected. However, given the enormity of what had happened, this debate was, and still is, extraordinarily limited.

**The war on terrorism**

The Bush Administration is now pursuing what it calls ‘a war on terrorism’. Despite considerable and necessary efforts to strengthen intelligence co-operation in the hunt for Al-Qa’ida...
suspects, the Administration sees its response to terrorism overwhelmingly in military terms. The notion that dealing with terrorism might also involve addressing underlying causes has been dismissed as tantamount to excusing the atrocities of September 11th. As Paul Rogers and Scilla Elworthy have argued, ‘the general political process [in the US] has concentrated almost entirely on seeing the perpetrators simply as fundamentalists acting from motives of sheer hatred for the United States and all it stood for...little attempt has been made to understand the motivations for this action, or to see it as part of a longer-term strategy, or, indeed, to investigate the political context.’

The huge culpability of successive US and other western governments in creating the conditions for some of today’s terrorist violence has also been conveniently overlooked. As Fred Halliday has argued ‘There is a striking Western responsibility for stoking up Islamic movements in the cold war period and in helping to promote the kinds of autonomous terrorism that culminated in the Taliban and in Al-Qa’ida.’

US-led military action against Al Qa’ida and the Taliban in Afghanistan is presented as the first stage in this ‘war on terrorism’. As this is written there is a real prospect of US-led military action against Iraq, although no credible evidence has been produced that links Saddam Hussein to the attack on the twin towers. The possibility of action against Iraq reveals the breadth of this US ‘war’. This is now said to include not just action against terrorist groups but also, where it is judged appropriate and/or possible, action against rogue states, particularly those with weapons of mass destruction.

**The limitations of military action**

A response to international terrorism that relies exclusively or even mainly on military action is almost certain to fail. Military action will sometimes be necessary. While there are legitimate criticisms of the US military strategy with regard to Afghanistan, some form of military action was probably required. However, effective action against terrorism requires a much broader and more coherent set of policy responses.

Terrorism is violence perpetrated to achieve political objectives. The current US strategy of divorcing this violence from any kind of political context is a grave error. It is also mistaken to suppose that the issue of terrorism can be dealt with separately from other forms of war and conflict in the world. A strategy for dealing with terrorism needs to address the underlying causes of instability, conflict and political and religious extremism – through the development of a broader security agenda.

There are various elements to this agenda, including better forms of intelligence, police and legal co-operation across national borders. It should also involve addressing the funding of terrorist groups, through action against international crime and money laundering. This article focuses on four issues – regional conflicts, the development agenda, the promotion of democracy and support for post-conflict reconstruction, and arms control. Action across these areas could make a major contribution towards tackling the underlying causes of conflict, instability and terrorism.

**Resolving regional conflicts**

The international community needs to devote much greater effort to resolving major regional conflicts, particularly the Israeli/Palestinian dispute and the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. At the beginning of the Bush administration, it was declared that the US would not involve itself in helping to resolve these regional disputes. September 11th, the worsening of relations between Israel and the Palestinians, and the real threat of war between India and Pakistan earlier this year exposed the limitations of this approach. A war between India and Pakistan could easily culminate in the use of nuclear weapons. And the worsening situation between Israel and the Palestinians threatens to further destabilise the
Middle East region. Both disputes have served to radicalise a whole generation of young people, created extremism and fanaticism on both sides, and provided a fertile breeding ground for terrorism.

The international community as a whole, and the United States in particular, needs to apply maximum pressure on Israel and the Palestinians to bring an end to violence and to reach a political settlement. The current US strategy, of apparently uncritical support for the Government of Ariel Sharon, is a disaster and a recipe for further terrorism and instability. Huge pressure also needs to be brought to bear on India and Pakistan to curb extremism and violence on all sides and to begin serious negotiations. Failure to make progress in these and other regional disputes will lead to further political violence and terrorism in the years to come.

Tackling global poverty and underdevelopment
There needs to be a concerted global effort to tackle world poverty and to promote sustainable development. It is true that the particular individuals involved in organising and carrying out the attacks of September 11th were not poor. However, we would be wrong to conclude from this that there is no link between poverty, conflict, instability and political violence.

While there is no single or simple explanation for the outbreak of any particular armed conflict, there is a growing consensus about those factors that increase the risks of violence. In general, wars are more likely to be fought in countries that are poor or experiencing extremely uneven economic development and which lack effective political and legal institutions.

There is some evidence that the risks of violence may be further increased if a minority of people within a country are becoming very rich very quickly through rapid but uneven economic development. This is particularly the case when one ethnic, cultural or religious group is getting richer, while other groups are standing still or getting poorer. This inequality can compound the sense of grievance felt by those who continue to live in extreme deprivation, and can heighten ethnic and communal tensions. Political extremists can play on this disaffection, particularly amongst the young. For example, Al-Qa’ida and other terrorist networks appear to have been very successful in drawing support from disaffected young people in the Middle East and in Asia.

Reducing these risks of violence requires a strengthened international commitment to sustainable development and social inclusion – building on the undertakings given at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. Providing the poor with ‘a stake in peace’ – by strategies for pro-poor economic growth, and by investment in education, healthcare and other social services – could help to minimise the risks of social instability, violence and terrorism substantially.

The achievement of many of these objectives depends upon actions taken within less developed countries themselves, through the reallocation of resources towards investment in human development and by cracking down on corruption. However, developed countries can also play a critical role in enhancing the capacity of developing countries to provide for the basic needs of their people. That means not just more and better aid, but debt relief, encouragement for private investment, and, particularly, fairer terms of trade.

It is vital, for example, that the new round of trade negotiations, launched at the Doha Ministerial meeting in November 2001, should lead to real development benefits for
the poorest countries. At present, the rules of international trade are heavily weighted against the interests of developing countries, with developed countries imposing a series of tariff and non-tariff barriers against the products of poorer countries. For example, developed countries pay out $350 billion a year subsidising their agriculture and dump their agricultural surpluses on developing countries, destroying local livelihoods. The removal of these subsidies and greater trading opportunities for poorer countries could help to accelerate economic development, and contribute to greater global stability and security.

Supporting democracy and post-conflict reconstruction

Support for democratic development and human rights are also critical to the broader security agenda. The current security paradigm pays very little attention to these issues. Well before September 11th, some of the West’s key allies in the developing world have been dictatorships, countries like Indonesia under Suharto, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and even Saddam Hussein’s Iraq before the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Since September 11th, countries have been judged (particularly in the US) by whether they are for or against ‘the war on terror’, with their commitment to democratic values treated as secondary.

However, a serious long-term strategy for dealing with terrorism and political violence should give much greater emphasis to democracy building, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Societies with weak political institutions, no freedom of speech, and minimal commitment to the rule of law are extremely vulnerable to political violence.

In more stable societies one of the key functions of political and legal institutions is to manage tension and conflict and to resolve differences peacefully, in accordance with established procedures and rules.

Where these conditions are absent, or where the state is ineffectual or corrupt, groups with a grievance lose faith in the capacity of the state to help – or even protect them – thereby encouraging groups to take the law into their own hands. This is most acute in so-called ‘failed or failing’ states. As we saw in Afghanistan, these states are also vulnerable to being taken over by fanatical regimes and can provide a base for terrorist groups.

The policy response to these failings of governance in many countries needs to parallel the response to economic injustice and inequality. There is a need to support the development of inclusive political structures in which all sections of society feel they are represented, and in which human rights, particularly the rights of minorities, are safeguarded. Again, the main onus for this rests with the countries concerned. However, developed countries have a responsibility – and a strong security interest – in assisting this.

A coherent security policy also needs to address the problems of ‘post-conflict societies’. After the Taliban regime was deposed in Afghanistan, the US administration declared that ‘it was not in the business of nation-building’. However, nation-building is actually an essential element in security policy. While the overthrow of the Taliban has brought benefits to Afghanistan, the country remains deeply unstable. Levels of banditry, looting and armed robbery have increased and the writ of the Afghan interim administration does not extend much beyond Kabul and a few other cities.

Promoting lasting security in countries like Afghanistan requires a long-term international commitment. This may include a lengthy period in which domestic stability is underpinned by an international stabilisation force. It should also include substantial support for economic and political reconstruction.
Supporting international arms control
A fourth key element of this broader security agenda is arms control. This should include action to address weapons of mass destruction and conventional arms transfers.

The US administration appears to have concluded that the events of September 11th reduce the relevance of arms control. As they see it, rogue states do not play by the rules, and neither do non-state actors like Al-Qa’ida. In the US Administration’s National Security Strategy, arms control is downgraded and pre-emptive military action takes centre-stage. While it would be a mistake to exclude the possibility of pre-emptive military action categorically, such a doctrine carries enormous risks and could establish a very dangerous precedent. The threshold for such action should be set extremely high. To justify pre-emptive military action there would need to be an imminent and overwhelming threat that could not be addressed or deterred by any other means and action would need to be taken only with the explicit authority of the United Nations.

Far from arms control being insignificant, it represents a critical element in preventing rogue states and/or terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction. However, this requires action to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Conventions, to make systems of inspection more intrusive and to agree a co-ordinated international response to non-compliance.

A stronger commitment to arms control should also involve a more restrictive approach to the export of conventional weapons. Irresponsible arms exports over many years have contributed to the abuse of human rights, regional instability and conflict. In a number of instances, a permissive approach to the export of arms has rebounded on the exporting country. American and British arms exports to the Shah in the 1970s ended up with the regime of the Ayatollahs after the Iranian revolution. US arms to the anti-Soviet Mujahideen reached the hands of the Taliban. And UK military equipment and arms to Iraq were used against British forces in the Gulf war.

The case for multilateralism
Dealing effectively with terrorism requires a broadening of the international security agenda and the development of a new security paradigm. The matters discussed here – the resolution of regional disputes, the promotion of sustainable development and democratic development, and international arms control – are critical to this.

However, most critical of all is the political framework within which these issues are addressed. The new US security doctrine gives the impression that the US can ‘go it alone’ on security questions. Global interdependence has rendered such unilateralism impossible.

This appears to be better understood in the UK and in parts of Europe, than it is in the United States, at least by the current US administration. The Blair Government’s close links to the Bush administration creates real risks for the UK, but also an opportunity. The risk is that the UK Government will be co-opted into a US-led global crusade against terrorism. This will involve pre-emptive military attacks on terrorist groups and rogue states, ongoing military actions that are likely to trigger wider instability, foment political and religious fanaticism and lead to greater rather than fewer acts of terrorism in the long term.

The opportunity, albeit one fraught with difficulty, is that Blair uses his access to, and influence with, Bush to help engineer a major shift in US thinking. The case needs to be made for a broader, more sophisticated approach to tackling terrorism and promoting security and the UK Government is as well placed as any to make it ●