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Scientific Research for Homeland Security: Fostering International Partnerships

During the 2008 Asia-Pacific Homeland Security Summit and Exposition, I was assigned to attend the panel *Scientific Research for Homeland Security: Fostering International Partnerships*.

The panelists discussed the critical importance to foster international partnerships, gave their insights on global terrorism and natural disaster issues, identified the common ground for mutually beneficial cooperation, and acknowledged the great benefits of international partnership for the Asia-Pacific region.

All panelists stated in the war against terrorism, the entire world is at war and we are all interdependent. The threat of terrorism has dramatically expanded: cyber space, utilities infrastructures, agriculture, food, and water. Terrorism has evolved into a much more sophisticated landscape. Nobody is protected. Therefore, all countries and all nationalities have to cooperate in order to protect our world from future terrorists or natural disasters.

In the opening speech during the Asia Pacific Home Land Security Summit, the Governor of the State of Hawaii, Linda Lingle, emphasized the extreme importance of expanding established international partnerships and build new relationships. Governor Lingle believes that a collaborative partnership, which is based on trust and equality, will advance knowledge and expand research opportunities in all areas including bio-preparedness, emergency response and anti-terrorism, as well as provide training to first-responders and others involved in global safety.

After the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, President Bush declared war on terrorism. In wars of the past, lines were clearly drawn with the good on one side, and the bad on the other. In a conventional war, our planet earth, as we know it, helps us to identify and locate our enemy.

Oceans, continents, and borders are clearly seen and separate us from the enemy. On one side is safe haven, and on the other side is danger.

The war declared on terrorism by President Bush at the onset appeared to be more of the same...going after Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, then Saddam Hussein in Iraq. However, are we any closer to winning the war on terrorism? Have the terrorists retreated and run out of places to hide and surrender? What side of the border or the ocean are they on? Is our homeland a safe haven? In essence, in the war against terrorism, the world is indeed flat. There are no oceans, continents, or borders to clearly separate us from terrorism. There are no towering vantage points to scan the horizon. You can only see what is directly ahead of you, knowing that terror can strike around every corner day or night; crossing this landscape alone could be risky and life threatening.

Therefore, the paramount question during the panel was how much closer would the world be in reducing the threat of terrorism if a global network of partnerships existed and were sustained today? One of the panelists, Major General ANM Muniruzzaman, the president of Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, emphasized that forming partnerships would allow us to learn from each other's successes and failures. Terrorists will quickly realize that what may have worked once may not necessarily work again anywhere. They will be forced to constantly change their untried or unproven methods leaving them more vulnerable to mistakes and having their plans thwarted. Terrorists will be forced to take greater risks, and in doing so will need more time to plan and evaluate and less time to execute. Their resources will run dry and adding more can be traced. Global partnerships will close the doors to safe havens...terrorists can run, but they can't hide.

At the same time, I absolutely agree with the panelists who cited that the fight against terrorism is not simply about forming global partnerships alone. Terrorists get their education from the best schools in the world and are highly skilled and trained. As the Honorable Jay M. Cohen noted "we should not worry about stupid people doing stupid things, but we need to be worried about smart people doing stupid things". The global community should not underestimate the terrorists' potential. The Internet provides a global communication network for terrorists. Advanced technology is actively being used and can migrate transparently and undetected. There is no need to travel to spread terroristic ideology. Therefore, we

need to ensure that our network of partnerships is at the cutting edge of advanced technology in a global communication network that can detect, track, and stop any and all terrorist activities around the globe. However, while I completely agree with this sentiment, we should not forget that globally raised security and vigilance in communication network will also affect people's privacy. Therefore, balancing between raising security and safeguarding people's privacy is another subject that should not be overlooked. We all know devastating examples of the Stalin regime in soviet Russia where under the flag of protecting the country from an "international war on communism", soviet people were completely deprived of their privacy and freedom of speech, religion, and press.

The panel's discussion on the correlation between terrorism and extremism caught my attention. While I agree that besides the need for cutting edge science and technology, winning the global war on terrorism will require a shift in our belief of the cause and effect of terrorism. For example, it would appear that the attack on the World Trade Center, the effect, was caused by terrorism, until you take a closer look. It was Muslim extremists, the cause, who committed an act of terror, the effect, which happened to be the attack on the World Trade Center. People need to remember that extremists are not only Muslims; all other religions may have people who harbor thoughts of extremism. One can say that there are many other people who harbor thoughts of extremism that are politically motivated. Therefore, I strongly believe that if religion alone is not what fuels terrorism, and extremism is the undeniable root cause that results in acts of terror, we must focus on what, how, and where extremism starts. Clearly then, the war on terrorism, should be a war against extremism. This was the main point of numerous speeches by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, in Singapore. As he mentioned, it should also be an attack with a double-edged sword; one side with cutting edge science and pro-active technology that can detect and stop all acts of terrorism by any extremist, and the other edge that would remove barriers and clear the way for society to create an environment where there is no place for radical thoughts, and where people cooperate with their government. One of the examples of such cooperation was brought up during the summit. The example was from Philippines where citizens call the police if they see something suspicious or hear that somebody wants to form some kind of radical or extremist group. Again, as I mentioned above we need to be aware of that very fine line between

eliminating extremist thoughts and depriving people of having a different point of view to avoid violating our constitution on freedom.

Last but not least, we also need to invest more in understanding the deeper roots of extremism.

This was the part of the discussion where I could relate the most. I was born and raised in the former Soviet Union. My understanding and perception of the Western world were based on the information that was provided by the Russian government and media at that time. Much later I learned that it was far from reality. I trust that fear comes from the lack of knowledge and hatred is caused by fear and misconceptions. Therefore, I am a strong believer that we need to understand different cultures, foster educational programs to learn different languages and traditions, and extend our hands in friendship to other countries in order to be equal partners whom can engage in a common mission to secure our homeland and the land of our global neighbors. We also need to engage future generations to help minimize and eliminate hatred, teach them acceptance, and explain that different does not mean wrong.

Another area discussed during the panel was natural disaster prevention. All panelists believed that this is the area where we could greatly benefit from working together. It is extremely important for countries to collaborate in addressing possible natural disaster strikes. Tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, fire, or floods do not divide people by skin color, religion, gender, or age. In the face of disaster, we are all equal, and all lives are precious. Natural disasters are devastating and can lead to financial, environmental and human losses. The 2004 tsunami in Asia killed more than 225,000 people who belonged to eleven different countries. Natural disasters strike with little or no warning, and if left unchecked, millions may die. However, there is hope and many things can be done to protect our world from devastation. During the panel it was clear that international partnerships, mutually beneficial cooperation, preparedness, knowledge, and extensive use of science and technology in a global network can now reduce the threat of tsunamis and other natural disasters.

I was recently awarded citizenship in the United States. The opportunity to participate in the Asia-Pacific Homeland Security Summit as a Student Fellow helped me to understand that the homeland security industry is the industry where I can express my gratitude for the great honor to be an American by contributing my enthusiasm, education, and cross-cultural experience to the safety and security of our world.