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DÉJÀ VU? AUSTRALIA'S REACTION TO BALI

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In the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the French daily *Le Monde* eulogised the tragedy with the memorable statement: "We are all Americans now." Following the recent Bali atrocity on October 12, where a reported 34 Australian lives (with another 55 still unaccounted for) were, in Prime Minister John Howard's words, "wantonly and barbarically taken away," one may equally say we are all Australians now.

Solidarity in grieving with our Australian friends over the tragedy in Bali is, of course, quite apropos. That said, however, a couple of significant differences between what happened in America and its ostensible equivalent in Bali are obvious. For one thing, the Bali incident, which involved the appalling taking of lives in two exclusive nightclubs – the so-called "twin towers" of Sari and Paddy's, which, ironically, cater only to foreign clientele – marks a shift in terrorist tactics to hitting what counter-terror experts euphemistically call "soft targets." For another, unlike the attacks in New York and Washington, this latter act of terrorism was not committed on Australian soil.

Beyond these differences, Australia's reaction – or, for many Southeast Asians, overreaction – is revealing in its discomfiting similarity with that of America in the latter's reaction to the original September 11. Warning of potential future terrorist attacks against Australians at home and abroad, Canberra changed its tune overnight from previously downplaying the likelihood of attacks against Australians to now exaggerating the nation's vulnerability, as did a columnist who likened Australia to "the fat duck in the little pond at the height of the hunting season." Dismissing criticisms that his government's upgrading of a travel warning against "high-risk" Southeast Asian nations (including Singapore) was an overreaction to the Bali incident, Mr Howard retorted: "Nothing is going too far in the present circumstances.... We are dealing with people who have no respect for human life."

Discerning audiences may be forgiven if they sense a touch of *déjà vu* in the grim rhetoric of Mr Howard. After all, his estimation employs more or less the same simplistic logic in renditions proffered by U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair: that there is no need to understand the perpetrators of these terrorist acts, to appreciate their histories, their resentments. To do so, the logic continues, is tantamount to condoning their dastardly deeds. All we really need to do, indeed all we must do, is simply get them, dead or alive.

Mr Howard conceded that he did not wish to sound alarmist, but as *South China Morning Post* reporter Roger Maynard noted, a mood of retribution now fills the air Down Under. “Yes, they should be angry, they should be angry at the people who did this,” the premier remarked of his fellow countrymen.

Mr Howard is, of course, absolutely right. But there is some irony in all this, if not for the fact that the Bali episode is so tragic. September 11 was an unacceptable act of evil planned and perpetrated by Osama bin Laden, whose incarnation as a master *jihadi* in then Soviet-occupied Afghanistan had as much to do with hearty American backing as his personal religious conviction.

October 12, though much smaller in magnitude, was equally an unacceptable act of evil that took place in Indonesia, whose troubled history with state-sponsored violence against its own population owed a fair bit to Canberra’s long complicity. As leaked documents have since revealed, the Howard government had prior knowledge that the Indonesian army was setting up militias to terrorise, and eventually massacring many of the East Timorese in 1999. Yet Canberra feigned ignorance and did nothing. Which, as John Pilger noted recently, makes mockery of the claim that Australia had “lost its innocence” in Bali.

There is no intention here to imply that Bali was Australia’s comeuppance. No nation or people, not least Australians, deserve to endure what Australia experienced. Yet it bears reminding that of all the casualties of the Bali carnage, at least half were non-Australian. Nevertheless, this important fact appears to have been glossed over in the current attention over Australia’s loss. Against this backdrop, references appearing in the Australian media to October 12, 2002, as “Australia’s September 11” or “Australia’s Pearl Harbor”, even as Canberra issued travel advisories against all Southeast Asian destinations for Australian travellers, smacked of gross insensitivity.

Indeed, Australia’s reaction would seem to suggest – wrongly so – that October 12 is strictly an Australian affair, much to the chagrin of the Balinese and Indonesians. “Why are the Australians and the rest of the world not offering the same emotional support for Indonesia as it did for the US last year?” wrote a concerned reader to the *Straits Times* recently. “As the world mourns with Australia, [Australia] should also mourn with Indonesia and Southeast Asia.”

It behoves us all – and in particular Australians – to bear in mind that the Bali attack is equally if not more a tragedy for Indonesians as for Australians. In the immediate aftermath to September 11, many coalition partners readily joined America’s war on terror, despite or because of Washington’s infamous “either you are with us or against us” caveat. Today, key partners openly dissent with the United States on going to war against Iraq. The fight against international terrorism requires a multilateral approach to be successful. Canberra cannot afford to go it alone without the assistance of Southeast Asian governments. Nor can Southeast Asian nations do without Australia.

No matter how understandable, an overly ethnocentric reaction produces more negative than positive results – for Australia as well as Southeast Asian nations. Australia would do well to eschew an American-styled unilateralism that gains itself no friends, only more enemies.

On the first anniversary of September 11 this year, the front page of *Le Monde* read: “We are all still Americans – but not every day now.” It does not have to be so for Australia.

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