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Protect our friends to protect our flank

Any day now, the United States will launch a major military counteroffensive in the war against terrorism. While I believe such a course of action is in our best interest, I am also inclined to raise a flag of caution relative to the need to do all we can to contain the casualties in this war.

On Sept. 11 we were seriously wounded, both in the assault on the symbols of American prosperity and military might and in the ongoing damage to our economy. But we need to be mindful that although we've been wounded, some of those supporting our cause are hemorrhaging.

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Nowhere is the hemorrhaging more damaging than in Africa. We had 6,000 casualties; but the attack threatens to push millions more in Africa into poverty, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths of children from easily preventable diseases.

Prior to the attack, the World Bank projected growth rates for the developing world in the neighborhood of 4.3 percent. In its aftermath, those growth rates could fall to 3.5 percent.

This downward slide is the result of a precipitous decline in direct foreign investment and a 65 percent decline in tourism. While we must do everything to protect ourselves, we must not allow our allies in this cause to suffer possibly irreparable harm. There are a number of reasons why.

First, it is simply not right to allow our friends to die needlessly in the cross fire of

our efforts to launch a frontal attack to eradicate terrorism.

Secondly, many African countries themselves are under assault from the same forces, as evidenced by the arrest of accomplices in the attack against us in South Africa, Mauritania and Senegal.

Thirdly, if we allow burgeoning democracies such as Tanzania, Mauritius, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Senegal, Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana to suffer significant economic dislocation and increased poverty, then we become unwitting accomplices in creating the very conditions that give rise to the fanaticism we're trying to fight.

The point being, if we aren't mindful of our obligation to fight the war on terrorism on this front as well, it will in effect provide aid and comfort to the enemy we're trying to defeat.

There are a number of things we can do to protect our flank. Honoring our decade-old pledge to raise our aid contributions to the developing world significantly beyond the 0.2 percent of our gross national product would help.

But ultimately it is trade and investment, and not just aid, that will make the difference. The African Growth and Opportunity Act, which passed with bipartisan support during the last year of the Clinton administration, represented a good start in dealing with the conditions that give rise to poverty and discontent in Africa.

The Bush administration needs to move

forthwith to further the aims of that legislation. For example, the administration should move aggressively in negotiating Free Trade Agreements with those African countries moving on democratic and free market reforms. In addition, we need to make sure that the "African point of view" is represented in the ongoing deliberations about how the world deals with terrorism.

Finally, as we pursue African countries such as Sudan as our partners in this enterprise, we should treat them as real partners and not be reluctant to insist on conditionals — like the furtherance of democratic and free market reforms — as the basis for our engagement. If we don't fight the fight against terrorism on this front as well, we could win the proverbial battle in Central Asia and the Middle East and lose the war.

As we go forward to prosecute this war against terrorism, we cannot lose sight of the fact that our best defense against terrorism is propagating the values and systems that enable people to pursue their dreams and aspirations for a better life. Though we've been wounded, our economy is still the world's most vibrant. It is this power, as well as our military might, that must be brought to bear if the world is to be freed from the scourge of terrorism and religious intolerance.

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