

Remembering Our Friends on 9/11

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*The first world leader to call **President George W. Bush** after 9/11 was **Vladimir Putin**. In fact, he had called him two days before, on September 9, to warn Bush that, based on unfolding events he had observed in the environment, he had “a foreboding that something was about to happen, something long in preparation.”*

Watching the twin towers being struck, Putin immediately phoned President Bush to offer his condolences and understanding. When his call couldn’t reach Bush because he was on Airforce One, Putin immediately spoke to **Condoleezza Rice**, asking her to pass his message to Bush. The next morning, Putin reached Bush and assured him that “in this struggle, we will stand together.”

Putin offered more than understanding and standing together: he offered total support for whatever Bush decided to do. He and Bush later spoke on the phone for forty minutes. The next Monday, Putin [offered](#) to share intelligence with the US, to permit the US to use Russian airspace for humanitarian assistance, to participate in search and rescue operations and to increase military assistance to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. He even stunned the Americans by offering, after an initial hesitation and against the advice of senior Russian military commanders, to allow US troops in Central Asia. The US would [establish bases](#) in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Russia’s intelligence sharing was of great value because, during its own war in Afghanistan, it had gained detailed knowledge of the country. Russian intelligence provided a veritable map for the US, helping them navigate Kabul and the many mountains and caves. Even before 9/11, by June 2000, Russian intelligence was sharing information on the terrorist threat from Afghanistan.

Putin was still hoping, at this time, to improve relations with the US and the West. He hoped that his assistance to and cooperation with the US would facilitate that relationship. Putin saw the tragedy of 9/11 as a moment to show the US that a world order was possible in

which Russia was a partner. In a [speech](#) in Washington in November, 2011, Putin said,

“It is very important that the interaction between our countries in fighting terrorism does not become a mere episode in the history of Russian-American relations, but marks the start of long-term partnership and cooperation.”

But in return for helping the US to win the war in the same country the US had lured the Soviet Union into to lose its war decades earlier, Russia got nothing, and NATO remained committed to expanding east. By 2004, the “big bang” of NATO expansion had moved NATO into the Baltic countries and right up to Russia’s border.

Francis Richards, then head of the GCHQ, Britain’s NSA, once said, according to Philip Short in *Putin*,

“We were quite grateful for Putin’s support after 9/11, but we didn’t show it very much. I used to spend a great deal of time trying to persuade people that we needed to give as well as take . . . I think the Russians felt throughout that [on NATO issues] they were being fobbed off. And they were.”

On 9/11, **Jiang Zemin**, the president of China, was watching the terrorist attacks on TV. It took him less than two hours to call Bush to offer his sympathy and his support.

China’s response to 9/11 would grow more complicated as the war in Afghanistan grew more complicated, and China began to fear a prolonged US military presence in their neighborhood almost as much as they feared the Taliban’s terror threat and influence globally and in their own country. China feared the US military on its borders, its Pakistani ally being compelled to allow US bases on its territory and supply routes through its territory and the possibility of a strictly pro-US government being set up in Afghanistan.

As the war dragged on, China would not fully back either the Taliban or the US, maintaining diplomatic relations with the Taliban and even supplying them with arms.

But in those first hours in September, 2001, the Chinese leader immediately called the American President and offered his support. According to Andrew Small in *The China-Pakistan Axis*, China offered intelligence sharing and minesweepers. They even allowed the FBI to set up an office in Beijing. The US rejected much of China’s offer to help, but China offered it.

Iran, also, came to America’s aid after 9/11. After the terrorist attacks in the US, Iran immediately sided with the US against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The reformist president, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, wanted to improve relations with the US and, like Russia and China, saw the tragedy as an unfortunate opportunity to prove their partnership and friendship.

Iran arrested hundreds of the al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters who had escaped into her borders. Iran documented the identity of more than two hundred al-Qaeda and Taliban escapees to the United Nations and sent many of them back to their homelands. For many others who couldn’t be sent back to their own countries, Iran offered to try them in Iran. Iran also followed up on an American request to search for, arrest and deport several more al-Qaeda operatives that the US identified.

The Northern Alliance, who provided many of the anti-Taliban fighters once the Americans and their allies invaded Afghanistan, was largely put together by Iran, who placed it in the hands of the US. Iran offered its air bases to the US and permitted the US to carry out search and rescue missions for downed US planes. The Iranians also supplied the US with intelligence on Taliban and al-Qaeda targets.

Iranian diplomats were secretly meeting with US officials as early as October 2001 to plan the removal of the Taliban and the creation of a new government in Afghanistan. At the Bonn Conference of December 2001, Iran played what Iran expert and author of *Losing an Enemy*, Trita Parsi, called an absolutely crucial role in setting up Afghanistan's post-Taliban government.

In return, like Russia, Iran got less than nothing: all the US gave them was a membership in the Axis of Evil.

Russia, China and Iran, three of America's arch enemies all offered their hands in friendship after 9/11. Those hands were full of, not just words, but of real support. The world might be just a little better today had the US taken those hands and, as Francis Richards said, shown gratitude and given as well as having taken.

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Featured image: The World Trade Center south tower (L) bursts into flames after being struck by hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 as the north tower burns following an earlier attack by a hijacked airliner in New York City in this September 11, 2001 file photo. REUTERS/Sean Adair/Files (UNITED STATES DISASTER POLITICS)

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