Bin Laden’s death is only the beginning

But co-operation can defeat terrorism, writes Robert Imre.

The assassination of Osama bin Laden represents a moral victory for the US and its allies, and a serious diplomatic point of contention as unfounded suspicion and paranoia changed the way the border was administered. Muslims living in democracies and countries whose citizens had been educated in the West were suddenly subject to accusations by co-religionists and suffered discrimination.

However, once this was achieved, there was nowhere else to go for radical Islamists, as it became clear that Muslim political leaders were just as willing to sacrifice their own societies into the mire of suspicion and heavy-handed state control. Demanding terrorism requires dis-favoured “group-think” detective work. It requires patronising investigation, friendly police forces, and authorities willing to engage and turn their backs on nations at states to attempt to stem violence.

Countries such as Egypt and Pakistan, who have jaded discontents and used torture to try to rid themselves of Islamic elements, have had the most difficult time as their methods bred both corruption and more violence as a response from radical groups. The US and its allies, and all governments experiencing difficulties with domestic terrorism activity, need to press home their advantage.

Remember that in the recent uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, the radical Islamists were very much in the background, and not seen as enthusiastic reformers of the regimes they had previously labelled as “Western puppets”. This has led to loss of credibility for al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups everywhere. By emphasising peace-building and development initiatives, the terrorist organisations can be pushed back even further.

Engagement with democracy initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa is paramount, to take away the radicals’ main argument. There will be no terror cells emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan if young men and women emerge from those societies with basic education, the opportunity to see other parts of the world, and an end to the perpetual violence that makes up their lives.

One way to attempt to do this was to support Islam as a unifying force for the nation, and thus the dead end of having to support radical Islamists who inevitably sought to destroy the Pakistan nation.

There is a difficult road ahead for Pakistan as its security services, segments of the military and government are rife with corruption. Drones and missiles can’t change this, but prosperity and co-operation can.

In short, Bin Laden is a symbolic figure, not a strategic security one. His assassination marks the end of a long manhunt, an indication that radical Islam is waning, and represents an opportunity to stress the importance of choosing to co-operate with countries in their attempts to build free and prosperous societies.

Dr Robert Imre is a politics and international relations lecturer at the University of Newcastle and an author on global terrorism.

Population growth makes us smarter, richer

Economists forget: people aren’t units, writes Stephen Kirchner.

WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF POPULATION GROWTH AND IMMIGRATION FOR LIVING STANDARDS?

Economists have typically given the population something of a free ride, because they have struggled to find an economically meaningful role for population in their models of economic growth. Traditionally, they have reduced people to little more than labour inputs into the production process. The analysis of capital and productivity improvements raise living standards, not labour. Indeed, too many people can dilute the stock of capital, leading to a decline in productivity and living standards. More people can increase the demands made on current and future resources.

Economists typically think of population growth as leading to a trade-off between the gains from the division of labour, increased specialisation and economies of scale on the one hand, and diminishing returns on the other. In the long run, diminishing returns dominate and population growth has no long term benefits to living standards.

However, another perspective, associated with the late economist and professor of business administration Julian Simon argues that the economic significance of more people is not in the contribution made by their hands or their mouths, but their minds. New ideas and innovations come from the minds of people. The more people, the more new knowledge gets created. It’s the growth in knowledge that drives the improvement of living standards.

The increased pressure on resources and resource prices is a good thing in the long run. The greater these pressures, the greater the incentive to solve problems and acquire new knowledge. This results in an apparent paradox. Short-term scarcities lead to long term abundance. Rising commodity and other prices leave us better off in the long term, even though worse off in the short term.

Similarly, increased population and economic growth are more likely to lead to solutions to climate change than policies that retard growth. The costs associated with emissions abatement, climate change adaptation and related innovations become easier to bear the richer we are.

Increased population density is also an essential part of the process by which population growth leads to rising living standards.

Proximity to other people confers benefits on the inhabitants of big cities, which is why they are willing to incur significant costs in the form of increased congestion and higher land and house prices.

This is not necessarily an argument for a bigger population or higher immigration, but it is an argument for being much more relaxed about short run costs and for a greater policy focus on the long run benefits of population growth and immigration.

Dr Stephen Kirchner is a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney. He will speak on population growth and living standards at the centre tonight.