

UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AFTER THE 11 SEPTEMBER TERRORIST ATTACKS: A NOTE ON THE NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

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INTRODUCTION

This article is about how the terrorist attacks of the 11 September 2001 against the US have produced (or reproduced) and reinforced political outcomes related to security and defence designs in post-Cold War international politics. It should be emphasised, however, that our traditional conception of the classic factors of power in analysing and explaining the changing security environment is still relevant. International politics is still a realm of self-help where states face security dilemmas and force plays a considerable role. The logic of international conflict as described by Thucydides still applies in many parts of the world. The difference today is “the reach of impact, the complexity of the causal process, the range and capabilities of actors involved, and the acknowledgement that threat and response are no longer within the sole or even primary purview of the military.”¹ In such a context, the overall question becomes one of rationale in the context of security elusiveness in a turbulent world.

The replacement of the major military threat from the East by multi-level and multi-directional threats, though admittedly of lower tension, has lent great fluidity and instability to the international security system. The 11 September has clearly demonstrated the difficulties in anticipating and meeting the new problems that have arisen from the debris of the old order. Instability and a perception of insecurity have resulted from the change in the power structure and ideological configuration of the international system caused by the collapse of the entire deterrence regime as previously defined, that is to say, the encompassing of those norms, rules and procedures that provided the system’s governance. It may well be true that the end of the Cold War provides an opportunity to raise the strategic threshold, and thereby reduce substantially the possibility of a global conflict. But while, this may be true for Europe, one should not be too sanguine about the prospects for a ‘peace dividend’ in many parts of the world, like Central Asia or the Middle East.

This brief discourse aims to assess not only the definitional features of the new security reality, but also to show the need for change to be translated into policies and strategies that would lead to a further shift of the security (and defence) paradigm. Common themes involve debates about stability and instability; continuity and change; multi-polarity and leadership; co-operation and discord; power capabilities and patterns of behaviour. These will not be addressed in detail in this brief note but all of them still form a vital factual and analytical foundation to assess the world’s conflicts and the potential for their resolution.

THE NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

The world’s security problematique has changed too much in the past decade and possible responses are too different to expect that future security dilemmas will be clones of those that

plagued states in the past. In the eighteenth, nineteenth and much of the twentieth century the essential action in the global balance of power was in Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, the European continent is no longer necessarily the focus of shifting alignments and multilateral security. A balance of power could still be maintained in Europe, but disorderly developments in Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere could affect negatively the stability of the European sub-system.

The old, bipolar Cold War order provided a stability of sorts. With the passing of that order, conflict has not ended. It does, however, have different sources. At a system level, one could safely argue that the polarity change clearly reflects the development of new structural variables as products of trends aiming at revising institutional entities and state policies. And revision has been important but certainly not fundamental. The 11 September attacks have not altered the international political system so profoundly that old ways of thinking are no longer relevant. Changes of the system would do this. Changes in the system would not.²

Our thinking about the nature of security must change, but change should aim at taking account of its geographical and functional scope, its degree of institutionalisation, its strength and fragility and its ideological and normative elements. At the same time, our thinking about the pursuit of security cannot easily change since the ways states provide for their security have not been really affected. While the collapse of the Soviet bloc and accelerating globalisation has fundamentally altered the structure of geopolitics, our conceptual frameworks and menu of policy prescriptions cannot but remain infused with the basic logic of power politics. The murderous terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon validate the logic that security should be understood primarily in military terms. The militarised conception of security that grounded international relations during the Cold War cannot easily be challenged by other multifaceted and holistic conceptions.³

On a second reading, it is true that the collapse of communism and of Soviet hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe removed the immediate military threat. It is also true, that a threat to national security no longer necessarily evokes images of invading armies. The concepts, labels and even norms to which those in the Western security community have grown accustomed over the past decades are no longer so clearly applicable. While defence and defence policy still presumes that military force is the first or the most appropriate instrument, there are clear limitations to the application of conventional interstate-level analysis to the examination of international security in general.

All this amply proves that Laidi is right in stressing that the “reconstruction of meaning or purpose” and its linking with the exercise of (military) power cannot be settled through “any ideological or teleological deintoxication which the proponents of Popper’s open society seem to be advocating at times.”⁴ For all that, the divergence between meaning and power cannot be reduced to the tension between the integrating logic of the economy and the disintegrating dynamic of identity. It triggers a chain reaction affecting all the factors related to the exercise of political sovereignty, the most important of which being the military instrument. Which leads us to the commonplace but nonetheless essential observation: a military power, no matter how large, suffers a considerable loss of meaning the moment it is unable to connect power with a military policy.⁵ Afghanistan as well as Kosovo before that, shows that the divergence between military power and military policy, affects everybody in the system, even the US.

TRANS-NATIONAL RISKS AND TRANS-SOVEREIGN PROBLEMS

Security challenges become even more complex when one turns to those issues that may not directly challenge the viability of the state, in traditional terms, but that may nevertheless undermine the sovereignty of the state, compromise its ability to control the penetrability of its borders and exacerbate relations, whether between groups within the polity or between states within the regional or global system. Increasingly, it is argued that individual and collective security is dependent on our ability to confront the new challenges.

Trans-sovereign problems – problems that move beyond sovereignty and traditional state responses – fill the contemporary international relations agenda and make a mockery of state borders and unilateral state responses. The rise of trans-sovereign problems is made possible by changes heralded since the end of the Cold War: the opening of societies, economies and technologies.⁶ Among the new factors that transcend boundaries and threaten to erode national cohesion, the most perilous are the so-called ‘new risks’: drug trafficking, trans-national organised crime and nuclear smuggling, refugee movements, uncontrolled and illegal immigration, environmental risks and international terrorism.⁷ These are not new sources of potential conflict. They all existed to some extent during the Cold War, but were largely subsumed by the threat of military conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Today, however, trans-sovereign issues present a very difficult dilemma for policy makers: the very same policies that work to bring about open, democratic, pluralist societies and open markets also make trans-sovereign threats possible. Drug smuggling illegally uses the very same international financial networks that free trade and capitalist economic policies create. Thus, trans-sovereign problems can be difficult for states to address because effective action requires greater international co-ordination.

Responding, for example, to wide environmental degradation in the former communist states requires greater co-ordination among states, NGOs, IGOs, MNCs and other state and non-state actors, and groups which have different interests, capabilities and constituencies, and in any case it will be an important dimension of preventive defence. The political and economic costs of environmental degradation and mismanagement, such as the high disease rates and safety shortcomings in nuclear plants in the former Soviet Union, are proving to be formidable challenges to economic development and stability. The simple recognition of such problems, however, has not always elicited effective responses from the international community. Instead, nations have frequently opted to focus their energies on the more manageable manifestations of pending conflicts, such as arms build-ups, that result from disagreements between nations over non-traditional security issues.⁸

Because the world faces so many difficult security challenges and promising opportunities, all of which compete for attention and resources, it will be difficult to tackle these kinds of non-traditional threats. However, some of them simply will not be ignored for long. The environmental threats posed by the ageing nuclear infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe and former Soviet states, inadequate controls over highly enriched uranium, and other nuclear materials (including weapons-grade materials) in Russia, and the deterioration of nuclear powered vessels (some of which literally are rotting in port) could soon reach crisis proportions.⁹ These problems have not gone unreported. However, much more needs to be accomplished if future disasters are to be avoided.

Refugee movements and uncontrolled and illegal immigration represents yet another non-traditional threat to European security and stability. While the most publicised refugee flows in the past few years have occurred in Central Africa, more than 800,000 Bosnian refugees

remain in Germany and other European states, and almost 1,000,000 Albanians entered Greece and Italy. Many other refugees have resettled in Europe after fleeing or migrating from former colonies. The economic and social burdens these refugees place on government services have become substantial.

There are already some 30 to 40 million people displaced either across state boundaries or within states, and this figure is expected to rise dramatically as the consequences of global climate change begin to have an effect. As a result, numerous countries in Europe are beginning to re-examine their immigration policies and enforce more stringent standards. This could have a destabilising effect on the less economically advanced nations in Europe and could threaten inter-state relations. It also could lead to domestic unrest if more is not done soon to regulate the flow of refugees and expedite safe repatriation of those not accepted for long-term residence. Such policies will almost inevitably result in much suffering and not a little 'militant migration' as marginalised migrants are radicalised. In the interim, Europe is experiencing an increase in crime rates and hatred crimes, either of which could lead to instability and thence to conflict and insecurity.¹⁰

International terrorism has become more than ever a source of grave concern and this was so even before 11 September. Like drug traffickers, nuclear smugglers and international crime cartels, terrorist groups take advantage of the infrastructure that open societies, open economies and open technologies afford. They are more easily able to move people, money and goods across international borders thanks to democratisation, economic liberalisation and technological advancements. They rely on international telecommunications links to publicise their acts and political demands. While propaganda is nothing new, tools like CNN and the Internet dramatically extend the scope of a terrorist's reach. Terrorists also take advantage of weaker or developing states to serve as a base of operations for training and carrying out attacks against Western targets. As the 11 September attacks indicate, counter-state and counter-society abilities have already become more available to radical and fundamentalist groups. Overall these trends suggest that seemingly invulnerable states, however powerful and wealthy they may be, have innate weaknesses.

These factors, probably as much as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical and biological) and their means of delivery, and human-rights abuses, pose profound challenges to efforts to build a new global order as they are more than capable of contributing to violence and other forms of coercion. Contrary to other global challenges (the communications revolution, water shortages, access to energy resources, financial flows) they call directly into question the very authority of the state, and are therefore potentially, if not openly, subversive. This multifaceted conception of security entails a multifaceted approach to security. While an exclusively state-centred analysis is capable of illuminating some facets of discord and conflict in the 1990s (for example, proxy wars and irredentism), it is limited by its one-dimensional optic: distribution and character of military power.¹¹ This multifaceted-multidimensional security concept means that there is no rigid link between a comprehensive concept for understanding a new situation and the quality of the response. On the contrary, a broad concept – where military force and policy continue to occupy a central place – allows a flexible, tailored policy in which force is only one of the various means employed.¹² In the final analysis, security is a politically defined concept. It is debatable whether the widening of security might be a good or a bad political choice, but security is not intrinsically a self-contained concept, nor can it be related to military affairs only. If political priorities change, the nature and the means of security will inevitably follow and adapt to the different areas of political action.¹³

Finally, security is multidimensional because individual welfare is more central to policy-making than it was fifty years ago. Individual security can no longer be satisfied only through military measures; it needs a multidimensional understanding. As Politi has noted, "Individual security and international stability are becoming increasingly intertwined and a security threat is anything that hampers any relevant organisation in ensuring individual security."¹⁴ That means that security is elusive; more than ever, it is embedded in the interaction of localising and globalising forces. The axes of conflict in the shadow of the Cold War will probably be more complex, not less, and more difficult to manage, not easier. Policies begin to blur traditional dividing lines, both between jurisdictions and between concepts that were formerly discrete.

THE US IN THE POST-ATTACKS CONTEXT

The attacks on the US on 11 September have in effect ushered in a new era in international politics. The priorities of international relations, the nature of regional politics, the shape of political alliances, the driving purpose of US foreign policy, the nature of international cleavages, the evolving role of military forces and the risks of weapons of mass destruction were all affected by the epoch making terrorist attack on America on 11 September.

The terrorist attacks have altered the Western strategic threshold but they have not really challenged the US position in the world, although the impact on the US strategy debate is profound. In terms of international distribution of power, the overall international security paradigm is reasonably clear-cut. The US occupies a special place in the post-Cold War international system, especially in those aspects of the system dealing with national and international security. The US is unquestionably the pre-eminent military force in the contemporary world. No other power in the world rivals the American capability to project enormous military destructiveness, and therefore political influence, over very long distances. This does mean that the US possesses the most capable and mobile forces in the world, especially in critical areas such as airlift and sealift to carry forces to trouble spots around the globe.

In the medium term, US forces will maintain and enhance the ability to project power anywhere in the world by a variety of means. The air force has global reach using its strategic bombers and is capable of rapid regional build-ups using its air expeditionary wings. Use of cruise missiles and other stand-off weapons, stealth bombers, unmanned aerial vehicles and air and space-based surveillance and reconnaissance all make it possible to fight wars at a distance and with almost zero losses. Also, the navy, the marines and the army continue to maintain great power projection capabilities. By all these means, the US maintains the power to intervene at times and places that are considered necessary to protect its interests.¹⁵

Further, US superpower status is by no means confined to the military dimension. The US still has the largest and most vibrant single national economy. The combination of the two, in turn, drives the political and military strategy of engagement and enlargement that has become the lynchpin of US foreign and national security policy. Today the intellectual agenda within the debate about US foreign policy after 11 September is well defined by three challenges.¹⁶ The first is to evaluate how long-standing policy priorities and instruments carry over into the new era. The second is to identify new foreign policy issues that have emerged in the shadow of the attacks and the anti-terrorism campaign. The third is to pose the larger, transcendental questions about what the US stands for in the world and what Americans want to accomplish as a nation. Without answers to these questions, the evaluation

of priorities and policies is sterile and impractical. Not since the late 1940s has the policy research community faced such an all-encompassing task. The US cannot simply carry forward the strategies, policies and concepts of the past into a quite different present and possibly future. One clear lesson of the Afghanistan campaign (and Bosnia and Kosovo) however, is that very little concerted international action is possible without American leadership. All major post-Cold War strategic projects, like the unification of Germany, the liberalisation of world trade, the Gulf War and strong intervention in the former Yugoslavia, all required the US to articulate policies and convince, sometimes pressure others into joining.

THE US AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST TERROR

Again, in the campaign against international terrorism, the US took the lead. By exercising its right of self-defence, the US built a varied coalition in support of that right and has sought to develop a strategy to defeat terrorism with a global reach. A new strategic era has thus dawned. The US has a newly defined enemy, which is neither the old Soviet Union nor a potentially resurgent China, but international terrorism and (as my colleague Steve Simon has put it) terrorist sponsored states.¹⁷

The pursuit and defeat of these enemies has become the over arching goal of the Bush administration. It has therefore become a defining feature of international relations. Countries formerly having difficult relations with the US, ranging from Russia, to Pakistan, to Iran, have an opportunity to develop a new strategic framework for themselves. New relationships, even alliances, will be built on the campaign against terrorism, and these may well be quite long lasting. These changes in the international scene will have an impact on the domestic context in which foreign policy is made. Grand strategy, in the difficult circumstances of the information age, has returned to the fore. In this context, the US adopted a strategy of coalition building.

Indeed, US diplomacy since 11 September has been predicated on the need to build a large coalition of sorts, in order to fight the campaign against terrorism on many fronts and with many means. It is a coalition of sorts, because it is a coalition of variable geometry. So far, one country, the UK, has been involved in all elements of the campaign; broad political support, direct military involvement, military assistance, intelligence sharing, co-operation on financial controls, collaboration in UNSC diplomacy, co-ordination of diplomatic efforts, development of long-term geopolitical strategy, humanitarian and refugee policy, consultation on macro-economic dimensions and sundry work. Other countries are involved in a sub-set of these activities. Moreover, the US does not merely lead the coalition but others do not have much influence precisely because participation in the coalition is so varied and inconsistent.

These realities mean that that there has been no sea change, despite what some have suggested, in the instincts that animate the US administration. The Bush administration, despite its decision to pay UN dues and consult widely, has not embraced multilateral diplomacy in the traditional meaning of the phrase, nor found a new affection for international treaties. Indeed, the current campaign will make it likely that the US takes harsher judgements about the relevance to its own security of actual or proposed international instruments and it will be more, rather than less, vigorous in ensuring that these instruments do not constrain it when it seeks to act in self-defence.

For all that, 11 September makes prediction about the course of international politics difficult. The immense and unique problems posed in the post-Cold War world by the challenge of

achieving security are pervaded with ambiguity and the dynamics of transformation. In the new century, policy-makers confront circumstances that are more diffuse, multiple and uncertain than those faced by earlier generations. The September events just confirmed that the bonds of patron-client politics have loosened, thereby giving licence to the rise of micro-nationalisms, encouragement to narrow sectoral interests and legitimacy to unilateral efforts to redraw sub-national, national and even international boundaries. The rules are yet to be defined, where the true nature of threats remains shrouded by multiplicity and complexity and where it is hard to judge what constitutes winning and losing.¹⁸ In straightforward terms, 11 September has removed for good the Cold War ultima ratio for crude distinctions between friends and foes, between primary and secondary conflicts. The result has been a structural modification of the international stakes, from a vertical pattern (conflicts are not all of equal importance) to a more horizontal logic (conflicts are too complex and too specific for their settlement to be a simple task).¹⁹

As Europeans think about how to influence US policy effectively over coming months, they must pick their subjects carefully. One of the more vital roles that Europeans can play is to ensure that the US remains deeply and broadly engaged in the regions affected by the campaign against terrorism. In the aftermath of these attacks, the world cannot afford a US policy that is itinerant in character. Europeans can play a role in keeping the US engaged, but to do so they must lead by example, and this may be challenging for some. Indeed, the extroversion demanded of Europeans will put more stress on their recent traditions than will the hyper-engagement demanded of the US place on its strategic culture.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Post-Cold War global processes have been changing the nature of threat and forcing some adaptation of basic strategic principles and the pattern of allegiance associated with them. Each of these dimensions – threat, strategy and affiliation – is understood most readily “in terms of a sharp conceptual distinction: the difference between a deliberate opponent and a natural process, between strategies of prevention and strategies of reaction, and between co-operative and confrontational alignments.”²¹ Awareness of the conceptual difference is important in determining the direction of appropriate adjustments.

Traditional security policy has been concerned primarily with deliberate threat. For half a century, this has clearly been the dominant conceptual reference. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the major actors have disaggregated it and rendered it less specific. The formulations of threat currently used – ranging from major regional contingencies to lesser nationalist and fundamentalist war-prone regimes and groups to the eventual emergence of peer competitors – refer to the deliberately aggressive actions of calculating enemies who are assumed to have conscious identity even if they are not mentioned explicitly. “The threat emanating from distributed processes has been very much in the background of security thinking and clearly subordinate to the logic of strategic confrontation.”²²

It seems that globalising forces and processes have been making unintentional, distributed threats a much more prominent – an almost predominant – concern. To the extent that this occurs, the balance of strategy and affiliation will shift. In the international security context, this process appears to be generating a new class of security problems in which dispersed processes pose dangers of potentially large magnitude and incalculable probability. In reaction to those problems, policies seem to be shifting from contingency reaction to anticipatory prevention and coalitional crisis management. That appears to be the defining

core of a transformation of security policy. The pressure of events makes the indefinite continuation of established attitudes unlikely. It is reasonable to imagine that a radical shift in basic strategic circumstances will eventually call forth a commensurately dramatic redirection of policy.

1 David B. Dewitt, 'Introduction: the New Global Order and the Challenges of International Security', in David Dewitt, David Haglund and John Kirton (eds.), *Building a New Global Order: Emerging Trends in International Security*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 1.

2 Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1, summer 2000, p. 5.

3 See, for example, Kenneth Booth, 'Security and Emancipation', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, 1991, pp. 313-326; Helga Haftendorn, 'The Security Puzzle: Theory-Building and Discipline-Building in International Security', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, 1991, pp. 3-17; Edward Kolodziej, 'Renaissance in Security Studies? Caveat Lector!', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, 1992, pp. 421-438; Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: an Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991 (Second Edition); Michael Klare and Daniel Thomas (eds.), *World Security: Challenges for a New Century*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

4 Zaki Laidi, 'Introduction: Imagining the Post-Cold War Era', Zaki Laidi (ed.), *Power and Purpose after the Cold War*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1994, p. 2.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

6 Maryann K. Cusimano, 'Beyond Sovereignty: the Rise of Transsovereign Problems', Maryann K. Cusimano (ed.), *Beyond Sovereignty: Issues for a Global Agenda*, Boston/New York, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000, p. 4.

7 Western European Union, *European Security: a Common Concept of the 27 WEU Countries*, WEU Council of Ministers, Madrid, 14 November 1995, pp. 8-14.

8 The most prominent recent reminder of the need to take such threats seriously is the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government today still allocates nearly 15 percent of its national budget to managing the environmental after effects. The total economic and social costs incurred across Europe, including increased health care expenditures and declining life expectancies, will probably never be accurately determined. However, the threat of future Chernobyls is real. The problem of environmental degradation in Eastern Europe is not limited to unsafe nuclear plants, however. It already extends to polluted rivers, toxic dumping, unproductive farmlands, non-existent emission controls and myriad other threats to life. Like Chernobyl, these threats must be addressed because their consequences are far-reaching and unacceptable, not only to the populations in Central and Eastern Europe and in the newly independent states, but to the whole of Europe. See Ralph A. Hallenbeck, Thomas Molino and Kevin Roller, *Preventive Defence: a New Framework for US-European Security Cooperation?*, The Centre for Global Security and Co-operation, Wilton Park, July 1997, p. 40.

9 For several years the US has been attempting to address these kinds of problems through the Co-operative Threat Reduction (CTR) programme. Through CTR, the US has helped destroy ballistic missiles and silos and has even purchased some highly enriched uranium from the former Soviet Republics and assisted in setting up improved nuclear safety, security and safeguard procedures. To date, however, the CTR programme has not eliminated the problems

nuclear materials pose. Indeed, many experts believe that too much attention has been paid to dismantling missiles and silos, and far too little has gone to safeguarding nuclear weapons, military and civilian reactors, and loose materials. This connection appears to have substantial merit. If preventive defence policies are to be taken seriously as a framework for addressing these kinds of non-traditional threats to European security, US, Russian and European governments must do more. See *ibid.*, p. 41.

10 Western European Union, *European Security: a Common Concept of the 27 WEU Countries*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

11 The best example is John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1, summer 1990, pp. 5-56. He argues that the demise of the Cold War order is likely to increase the chances that war and major crises will occur in Europe: "The next decades in a Europe without superpowers would probably not be as violent as the first 45 years of this century, but would probably be substantially more prone to violence than the past 45 years. This pessimistic conclusion rests on the argument that the distribution and character of military power are the root causes of war and peace" (p. 6).

12 According to Politi, "Only in short-term lobbying battles is an alternative between prevention and repression seen". See Alessandro Politi, *European Security: the New Transnational Risks*, *Chaillot Papers 29*, WEU Institute for Security Studies, October 1997, p. 13.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 14. See also Barry Buzan, 'Rethinking Security after the Cold War', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 5-28.

14 Politi, *European Security: the New Transnational Risks*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

15 Paul Rogers, *Losing Control: Global Security in the Twenty-first Century*, London, Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 76-77.

16 Brad Roberts, 'Introduction', Brad Roberts (ed.), *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992, p. vii.

17 See the remarks by John Chipman, Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies: 'The Military Balance Press Conference', 18 October 2001.

18 James N. Rosenau, 'New Dimensions of Security: the Interaction of Globalising and Localising Dynamics', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 25, No. 3, September 1994, p. 255.

19 See Zaki Laidi, 'Power and Purpose in the International System', in Zaki Laidi (ed.), *Power and Purpose after the Cold War*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

20 See Chipman, 'The Military Balance Press Conference', *ibid.*

21 John D. Steinbruner, *Principles of Global Security*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 195.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 196.