

**Divided, But Unconquered Threats:
The Dangers in Inadequate and Incomplete National Security Analysis**

The death toll keeps mounting. And the threats keep metastasizing. In San Bernardino, California two homegrown violent extremists killed 14 and injured 22 people. Al Qaeda shooters stormed 3 hotels in Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast and left 18 dead. A car bomb attributed to a Kurdish terror group in Ankara, Turkey killed 34 and wounded 125. In Brussels, Belgium suicide attacks killed 38 and wounded 340 at the airport and at a metro station. Suicide bombers targeted Christians celebrating Easter in Lahore, Pakistan killing 70 and wounding 300. With so much blood and treasure at stake, it's hard to imagine allowing anything to limit awareness in dealing with threats. While there are few things as complex and difficult to assess and plan as national and global security, the need to make evaluating situations, options, and decisions more manageable can be perplexing. In trying to reduce the complexity of analysis, there's a risk of losing accuracy, nuances, or even the big picture. There's also a tendency to forget that problems evolve or transform over time, no longer fitting a neat definition – assuming they did in the first place. Yet perspectives and strategies often seem to be unwittingly oversimplified into black and white-like dichotomies that are ill-conceived and insensitive to timelines. Ignoring the spectrum of dangers and realities has undermined the urgency and clarity so needed in national and global security. This needs serious attention now.

New vs. Old

It's natural that the newest threats and measures grab attention, resources, and effort. Consider some of the leading national security issues and tools: cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and UAVs/drones. However, old threats, such as WMD proliferation and nation-state aggression, seem to have been neglected or demoted at everyone's peril.

There's no better example than the Putin's Russian resurgence. The end of the Cold War proved to be an expiration date that the Russians hadn't observed. Initially mired in nation-rebuilding, Russia didn't take kindly to being demoted from its super power status. Vladimir Putin increasingly bolstered himself and reinserted Russia into regional and global affairs, such as the invasion of Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. When a Russian three-star general walked into the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and announced that Russian jets were about to begin bombing Syria, decades of U.S. policy on Russia (and the Middle East) were instantly turned upside down. What hasn't changed is Russia's nuclear weapons capabilities and rhetoric. Their "apparent belief that these weapons can be leveraged or used for coercive purposes" recently led Secretary of Defense Ash Carter to question "Russian leaders' commitments to strategic stability."¹

Similarly, last month "North Korean leader Kim Jong Un watched a ballistic missile launch test and ordered the country to improve its nuclear attack capability by conducting more tests."² South Korea raised their threat alert after North Korea reportedly conducted its fourth nuclear test in January and fired long-range rockets in February and March. Such potential new capabilities are only raising decades-long tensions on the peninsula and in the region. Even long-time ally China urged caution as it

¹ Paul Bernstein, "Making Russia Think Twice About Nuclear Threats," *War on the Rocks*, March 9, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/making-russia-think-twice-about-nuclear-threats/>.

² Jack Kim, "North Korean leader Kim orders more nuclear tests: KCNA," *Reuters*, March 12, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-idUSKCN0WC2YQ>.

“reaffirmed its commitment to fully implement United Nations sanctions against Pyongyang over its recent nuclear tests and missile launches.”³

On the same front, the landmark multinational deal with Iran to prevent their possession of nuclear weapons was met with mixed praise and much criticism. Recent ballistic missile testing, while allowable under the deal, only increased skepticism over Iran’s intentions and honesty. (Marking the missiles with “Israel must be wiped off the Earth” in Hebrew made their views clear.) Adding to suspicions were recent attributions of a 2013 cyber attack against a New York water dam to Iranian hackers working for the Iranian government. Meanwhile, Iran’s state sponsorship of terrorism continues to fuel expanding violent and ugly regional conflict.

The rest of the world also remains less than secure. In Brazil, mass anti-government protests and corruption allegations against the current and former presidents cast a dark shadow over the upcoming Rio Summer Olympics. Adding to a worsening economic crisis, Venezuela announced they were effectively shutting down for a week at the end of March as the government struggles with a deepening electricity crisis. Further, there is little improvement in either Iraq or Afghanistan, with many government and military leaders urging the White House not to draw down the number of troops in Afghanistan. It’s said that old habits die hard, but the current environment proves clearly that old threats don’t either. Security planning can’t afford to ignore the past.

Now vs. Later

The length of a generation is generally 25 years, far beyond the scope of many national security strategies. This doesn’t sound as distant when you consider that Operation Desert Storm began 25 years ago in 1991...and that battle is still being fought. There’s a tendency to look at set periods of time (e.g. Cold War era, post-9/11 world), but forget that these are man-made constructs. The scale and scope of security challenges can transcend any time-table. Challenges can be multi-generational, at best, but can also last decades and even centuries. The same can be said of the future. Such a temporal disconnect is understandable. The present is tangible and urgent; the future is intangible and uncertain. However, not accepting that the future is closer than you think delays addressing two significant needs: 1) Creating a longer-term vision for national and global security; and 2) Balancing how to address immediate/short-term threats while creating that longer-term framework to achieve the vision.

The argument against shortsightedness is compelling. As early as 2010, former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Michael Mullen was warning everyone that “the most significant threat to our national security is our debt,” particularly the implications for military readiness, R&D, and modernization.⁴ Six years later, the government has seen budget battles, sequestration, continuing resolutions, yet nothing but rhetoric on the nearly \$19 trillion debt, which has increased by \$4.5 trillion during this time. Just as adverse as inaction is reckless haste. As the future of American involvement in Afghanistan is debated, Gen. Joseph Votel, head of U.S. Special Operations Command, advised that “Our current military strategy of working by, with and through our partners requires both patience and perseverance. As we have seen in Afghanistan, our efforts will include both successes and setbacks.

³ Associated Press, “China Reaffirms Its Commitment to North Korea Sanctions,” March 15, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/china-japan-unite-support-sanctions-north-korea-37649858>.

⁴ “Mullen: Debt is top national security threat,” *CNN*, August 27, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/08/27/debt.security.mullen/>.

However, in the balance, this approach builds capacity and establishes local ownership over the problem.”⁵ Looking ahead at another threat domain, advances in cybersecurity have created significant defensive and offensive operational capabilities, while prompting questions about ethics, transparency, security and privacy, and the public’s right to know about the effects and repercussions related to such activities. These pressing questions also extend to other matters, such as drones/UAVs, robotics and artificial intelligence.

The answers won’t be found in a crystal ball, but in the willingness to plan ahead and relentlessly follow through. The feasibility and effectiveness of creating this mindset is best exemplified by China. As early movers in cyber, for example, China created informationized warfare units in 1994. Their goal of regional dominance may be realized within a year as China will “have significant capacity to quickly project substantial offensive military power to the region.”⁶ Surprisingly, many still ignore China’s global reach. Over the last 10-15 years, investments and the establishment of Chinese enclaves across sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and even the Caribbean have been made to secure rare earth minerals, oil, and other valuable resources, as well as creating a global on-scene presence.

The U.S. needs broader foresight. “We can drop bombs on ISIS...for the next 50 years, but unless we find ways to address the political tensions roiling the Middle East, Central Asia, and growing portions of Africa, new terror groups will continue to emerge from the ashes of the old. Meanwhile, bombs won’t stop climate change, cyber attacks, or epidemic disease. If we’re serious about U.S. national security, we need to get serious about developing a long-term strategy to protect U.S. interests in a world in which fewer and fewer threats can be effectively countered using military force.”⁷ Clearly a multi-dimensional strategy with a longer-term horizon is urgently needed.

Good vs. Evil

All stories, be it fairytales, movie plots or even religious parables, are based upon the most fundamental dichotomy – good versus evil. World history has been defined typically by battles between the good guys and the bad guys. Yet who fits in which category can be quite subjective. As the saying goes ‘One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.’ A prime example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with both groups wanting sovereignty for their people on the same land. As another example, in order to thwart the Soviet threat, the U.S. supported the Afghanistan Mujahedeen. After the Soviets withdrew, the void was soon filled by a mujahedeen movement called the Taliban.

The current war in Syria demonstrates how uncertain, conflicting, and destructive such a dichotomy can be. “It’s partly a civil war of government against people; partly a religious war pitting Assad’s minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shiite fighters from Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, against Sunni rebel groups; and increasingly a proxy war featuring Russia and Iran against the United States and its

⁵ Missy Ryan, “Central Command nominee may push for additional revisions to Afghanistan exit,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/09/central-command-nominee-may-push-for-additional-revisions-to-afghanistan-exit/>.

⁶ Franz-Stefan Gady, “What US Intelligence Thinks About China’s Militarization of the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/what-us-intelligence-thinks-about-chinas-militarization-of-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁷ Rosa Brooks, “What the 2016 Presidential Candidates Get Wrong About the Future of War,” *DefenseOne*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/03/what-2016-presidential-candidates-get-wrong-about-future-war/126478/>.

allies... The Syrian war looks different depending on which protagonists you focus on.”⁸ It creates quite the conundrum. Assad’s oppressive regime is unsupportable to the U.S. and allies, but not to Russia. Any Islamic State presence is unacceptable to just about everyone. So there are Syrian rebels, which number between a dozen to 1200 groups – depending on the count.⁹ Proposals to train and equip male Syrian refugees of military age to return to their country to fight are reasonable, but beg the question: who do they fight for...or against?

Syria begets another example. Even something considered to be as good as humanitarian aid isn’t so benevolently clear cut. Europe initially welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa, but quickly realized the scale and scope of such a mass migration was going to be disastrous. This led European leaders to finalize a deal in March to pay \$3.3 billion to Turkey over the next two years for help in stemming refugees and other migrants into Europe. Turkey has already taken in nearly three million Syrian refugees since the war broke out in 2011. Some 660,000 refugees who arrived in Europe last year came via Turkey.¹⁰ The deal has been characterized as “born of political desperation and fraught with practical, legal and ethical difficulties.” Some European leaders even questioned its legality. International organizations likened it to a ‘refugee trade,’ and Turkey declared they would not accept their country becoming an “open prison” for migrants.

What began as Syrian pro-democracy protests in 2011 has ballooned into a full-fledged and bloody civil war with worldwide repercussions. For national and global security strategic planning, it further proved that there aren’t always clear cut good guys or bad guys in conflicts, but the many differing participants are adding to the complexity and crossfire.

These dichotomies aren’t definitive or absolute. However, they do spotlight the hard-to-shake habits and perspectives that prevent action and progress. Threat actors have shown they are willing and able to exploit any opportunities and weaknesses, including such binary, obstructive thinking. Whether it’s weapons of mass destruction, narco-trafficking, dirty bombs, cyber warfare, Islamic terrorism, or the aggression of nation states, the hard truth is security challenges will never fit any convenient definition or solution. The overarching – demanding – imperative today is for a pragmatic, proactive and integrated strategy that incorporates these harsh, complicated realities. However, the only dichotomy that matters in America’s national security is life or death.

⁸ Kathy Gilsinan, “A Who’s Who Guide to the Syrian Civil War,” *DefenseOne*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/10/whos-who-guide-syrian-civil-war/123240/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Valentina Pop, “EU to Pay \$3 Billion for Turkey’s Help in Stemming Migrant Crisis,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-leaders-approve-migrant-trust-fund-for-africa-but-divisions-remain-1447327556>.