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“Hyper-Terrorism”: the Globalisation of Terror[†]

Introduction

National security as a concept defining a set of activities to be executed by the state has – it is argued - changed in meaning considerably in the last ten or so years. The loss of a stabilised overarching bipolarity as evinced by the Cold War’s international system and the loss of nuclear deterrence as practical tool has resulted in a challenge to established ways of ensuring for national security. At the same time, in the place of the last system’s bipolarity, it can be said that a new depth of globalisation has defined the evolution of western civilisation. Unfortunately, with the advent of modern history’s worst terror event: al Qaeda’s trifold attack of September 11th 2001, it may also be argued that the further spread of Western culture and business interests, in other words “globalisation” has not only acted as a catalyst for extremist, fundamentalist terrorism, but has also in its own way facilitated the spread of organisations such as al Qaeda and helped increase their efficacy. The following analysis attempts to identify trends in this posited globalisation of terrorism and assess how much political violence has changed and whether the post Cold War changes witnessed can be addressed by the national security structures inherited from that era.

Post Cold War Trends

Whilst the threat of strategic thermonuclear exchange under a WWIII scenario no longer obtains, another other national security task-set has been inherited from the Cold War era, namely, international terrorism. Whilst superficially the characteristics of a terrorist organisation and a terrorist atrocity appear to be unchanged, under closer scrutiny there are several quite evident transformative phenomena that allow one to differentiate between the terrorism of the Cold War and much of today’s political violence.

To begin with there has been a resurgence in terrorism that is not purely political in nature. The purely ideologically motivated and politically driven terrorism of the 1970s and 80s is seemingly becoming rarer and rarer. The classic terror groups represented by the likes of the PIRA or ETA are waning in significance. Or at least they are being challenged in their monopoly of political violence by groups with religious or even apocalyptic missions that are not country or region specific. The

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most shocking of examples of this evolution prior to 9/11 was the Japanese cult of Aum Shinrykio, whose claim to fame is that of being the first non-state actor to successfully deploy a chemical weapon against innocent civilians. This group had as its aim a global usurping of power through a series of chemical and biological weapon attacks, after which the cult would globally prepare for the apocalypse predicted by the cult's half-blind prophet/leader Shoko Asahara.

After this arguably seminal event, Aum's sarin attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, came September the 11th, an attack which was ingenious in so far as in this case a weapon of mass destruction's (WMD) lethality was extracted from technology that was otherwise innocuous, not a weapon at all, but a form of mass transit, the jet liner. Together these attacks describe a proto-trend that is supported by the statistics pertaining to all anti-US terror attacks in the last decade. If one compares the data appended to the end of each year's State Department report entitled "Patterns of Global Terrorism", it is clear that the frequency of individual terrorist attacks has been dropping gradually since the end of the Cold War, yet the lethality of subsequent attacks is increasing. This bucks the famous observation made by perhaps the most famous living terrorism analyst, Brian Jenkins, that terrorists are less interested in having a lot of people die, but rather "in having a lot of people watching". This move to greater lethality by a handful of actors leads some to conclude that in the search for more bang for your buck, it is inevitable that sooner or later terrorists will seek WMD capability. More on this later.

These are not the only observable metamorphoses. Together, al Qaeda and Aum can be taken as examples of a return to religiously or apocalyptically motivated terrorism, as opposed to solely politically motivated violence. Such groups are well known in the grander scheme of terrorist history, the Zealots, Thuggees and Assassins being the most famous of examples, but their like have mostly been conspicuous in their absence during the modern phase of terrorism's evolution. The return of such actors is significant in that such groups are more likely to have aims that are less regionally specific, which are more global in nature. Aum's have already been discussed. In the case of al Qaeda, whilst Osama bin Laden has at times made very specific, geographically delimited demands (most often in connection with removal of US troops from Saudi soil and the establishment of a free and independent Palestine) these demands fit into the larger declarative aim of destroying all of Western civilisation as it is heretical and antithetical to Islam. As a result bin Laden and his ilk obfuscate the line between purely political and purely faith-based violence.

The resurgence of religiously or apocalyptically motivated actors is all the more significant because groups with such holistic, faith based world views and aims must be handled in a different fashion by the authorities. A terror group with solely "rational" and feasible goals, such as the annexation of Northern Ireland by Eire, or the creation of an independent Basque-land, can in fact be negotiated with. There exist tools other than law enforcement or armed force with which to handle such actors, such as third party intermediary intercession or direct secret negotiations. We have seen this in the case of PIRA and the Good Friday Accords, for example. But a terrorist groups which extols global demands which can never be feasibly achieved can only be responded to with force and interdiction. The state is sorely limited in the tools it can deploy against such enemies.



A third set of trends regards targeting. Here it may be too early to prove the existence of a large-scale trend, but with the second and successful attempt against the World Trade Centre (WTC), following the earlier 1993 attack, al Qaeda at least, has demonstrated a determination to attack highly symbolic targets. This author believes the logic behind this tactic is clear. Terrorism is, like guerrilla warfare, always the tool of choice of weaker actors that cannot win a stand-up fight against their nation state adversary. As a result they will rarely, if ever, be in a position to exact lethal damage to the vital interests or functioning of the state they have pitted themselves against. This is why fear has to be the overarching goal, a fear which can be directed as a tool in applying greater and greater political pressure upon the targeted authorities until policies are changed. In this inculcation of fear the attack of universally recognisable symbols – such as the Pentagon and WTC – is invaluable, especially in this age of live, global cable and satellite news services. It is reasonable to posit that thanks to the likes of CNN, NBC, BBC, etc., Osama bin Laden was able to send his message of fear to as wide an audience at possible in the fastest time imaginable. Add to this last element of media exploitation, the recent rise of media outlets which challenge the “white man’s” news monopoly, e.g. al Jazeera, and we now have channel which in fact may be favourable to the terrorist and act as a force multiplier in the globalisation of his message. The significance of this latter point must not be underestimated. Here it is sufficient to note the exclusivity al Jazeera enjoys with regard to footage and recordings of bin Laden and the gulf between how Western networks and the new Arab networks covered the 9/11 related fall of the Baghdad regime. One group focused on the toppling of Hussein’s statues and the rejoicing of average Iraqis, whilst the other preferred to emphasise the looting and ensuing chaos the liberation brought, playing into the hands of anti-American, anti-Western propaganda.

The New International Scene

It is difficult to think of a terrorist group that can vie in global reach with al Qaeda. Yes, the PLO and other Arab terror groups had and still have international connections. Yes the PIRA was able to operate in both Northern Ireland and the UK mainland, as well as depend upon strong support from NORAIID in the United States. Yet the stretch of these groups pales by comparison to the current master of so-called “hyper-terrorism”. To begin with, growing as it did out of the Arab Service Bureau and the recruitment of mujahedeen from all over the globe, al Qaeda was international from the start. Then there came the various headquarters and training facilities established one after another in Pakistan, the Sudan and Afghanistan. Of course these had to be moved due to political and international pressures, yet the ability to “up sticks” so often and remain functional demonstrates distinct flexibility and makes for a very international trail of operations. Then, of course, there is the way in which al Qaeda’s operatives, after initial training, are globally dispersed. Recent arrests in the UK, France, Germany and Italy reinforce this attribute of global flexibility. But this flexibility, this globalisation is not limited to safe-houses and cells in the West but, according to most detailed accounts - the most informed being that of al Qaeda expert Rohan Gunaratna - the organisation, functioning as a conglomeration of various previous groupings, is present in no less than 40 other nations or regions spread judiciously over the whole globe, to include: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh,



Bahrain, Beirut, Bosnia, Chechnya, China, Dagestan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Indonesia, Jordan, Kashmir, Kenya, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, Tanzania, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan.

This level of international diffusion, not only in the history of the organisation's creation, but also in the dispersion of its operatives, is paradoxically not reflected by a global response to this new type of terror organisation. As witnessed by the fracas over Iraq, there is a clear lack of convergence within established security architectures with regards to current threat perceptions. Washington is convinced of the veracity of assessments based upon concepts of hyper-terrorism: political violence with a global reach that aspires to WMD capability (for detailed analysis of the new core policy documents espousing these views, including the National Strategy for Countering WMD, and the National Strategy for Countering Terrorism, see recent issues of JANES Terrorism and Security Monitor). Its formerly most reliable allies, with the exception of the UK and Australia, tend to disagree in this threat assessment, or at least in the tools to be employed against it, especially with regard to any unilateral use of force outside established international frameworks such as the United Nations and justified solely by the logic of pre-emptive defence, the removal of a threat prior to its becoming a fully developed threat.

Here it may be worth observing that this division may in fact be exactly what al Qaeda wished to achieve. By focusing almost exclusively on the US in its high exposure attacks, it was inevitable that there would eventually be a divergence in threat perceptions and that, given its superpower status, Washington would react militarily despite this difference of opinion. In doing so the US is acting altogether understandably but in ways that not only weaken its international relations to otherwise friendly nations, but in ways which reinforce existing claims that the conflicts of the post Cold War era will be more inter-cultural, or inter-civilisational than ones based on ideology or differences between nation states. While this author does not agree with the scenario of "civilisational clash" as made famous by Harvard's Samuel Huntington, most especially given the fact that in a globalised world most Arab and Muslim nations must maintain healthy relations with the US and the West, or otherwise commit economic and trade suicide, it is likely that through giving the appearance of being on a crusade in which the Stars and Stripes is one of the tools, the US contributes to pushing the otherwise undecided more closely into bin Laden's camp, at least as passive supporters.

Whilst in truth it would be an exaggeration to accuse the US of being an out-and-out empire, since in all the countries where it is militarily active – with the exception of Cuba's Guantanamo Bay – the US is there at the behest of the given government and always downsizes its engagement as soon as matters stabilise, these nuances are often lost on publics which have limited access internationally to information, or only to distorted versions of history and current affairs. Nevertheless, the question persists that although the elites of most Arab or Muslim countries are fully cognoscente of the need to maintain good relations with the rich nations of the West and North, the Arab and Muslim world still has a perturbed relationship to the question of modernity. The modern secular nation state as a model of how to function is to many, especially religious leaders, a model in contravention of fundamentalist interpretations of the



Koran. Whilst Osama bin Laden only represents a minority of these people given the heinous methods he employs, the fact remains that there are few statesmen prepared to follow the example of politicians such as Turkey's Ataturk and radically redefine their nation's attitude to modernity. It is interesting to note that despite the beacon-like example that modern Turkey represents, here too there have been significant developments toward the revitalisation of a national identity that relies far more on religion than would otherwise even have been imaginable during recent decades.

The Response to Dangerous Globalisation: is the West ready?

Let us for a moment avoid the burning issue of the gulf in threat perception amongst the developed nations of the West and take the Washington view on globalised hyper-terrorism as fully reflecting the current state-of-affairs. The natural question then becomes: is the West / the United States able to deal with the new threat? Here we immediately run into problems.

The apparatus for dealing with threats to national security evolved gradually over time after the Westphalian model of state architecture was nominally established in the 17th century. The Cold War simply codified and embedded these structures which were defined around clear categories derived from the nature of various sub-threat, these being military, civilian, external or internal. This resulted in the clear division of labour that exists to this day between police authorities, intelligence services (both civilian and military) and the army. Such an historic division was necessary and logical given the fact that the enemy of first order was always a nation state or group of nation states. As a result the most important tools of national security were designed and moulded with exactly this in mind, that a national state was the enemy. Unfortunately none of these tools has fundamentally changed since the Cold War was won by the West. We have more than enough tanks and nuclear weapons, more than enough intelligence operatives specialising in Russian and able to make "net assessments" of a nation's lethal capacity. We are rather worse of when it comes to people able to penetrate fundamentalist organisations, able to make net assessments of the scale and capacities of globally dispersed networks with no fixed boundaries, or capitals, without GDPs. Allegedly on September 11th itself there was only one CIA employee, for example, who spoke Pashtun. It does not matter how many spy satellites one has to intercept telephonic transmissions. If the majority of your linguists speak Russian, then you will not be able to make operational intelligence from the reams of data technical intelligence provides. Likewise, if you have no human intelligence sources functioning actually inside al Qaeda's headquarters, for example, it will remain nigh impossible to intercept and apprehend its leader.

In fact this non-applicable national security inheritance seems to be being reinforced instead of radically redrawn. The creation of the new Department for Homeland Security, with its 170,000 employees and near 40 billion dollar budget is a behemoth that obviously reflects Cold War thought reflexes. Unfortunately the enemy in this case – unlike the USSR and Warsaw Pact – is not a behemoth, but instead is hyper-mobile, horizontally dispersed across a myriad of nations (often allies) and seemingly can operate in a fashion whereby initiative is delegated to a low level obviating the



need for tight and frequent communications between its cells and the centre. Hardly a behemoth.

Currently there exists one additional factor that simply compounds the problem and helps enlarge the disparity in threat perception we have ignored temporarily. This factor relates to al Qaeda's targeting strategy. We have justifiably observed that this new focus of our attention is a truly global operator. Nevertheless, whilst it exists globally and targets the US interest likewise in a global fashion, from the American mainland to embassies in Africa and military vessels in Yemen, it is not truly global, or catholic in the range of its targets. Al Qaeda has yet to execute a stupendous atrocity against a nation other than the United States. In fact in Washington one can often hear exactly this charge, that Europe will not take the globalised terror threat seriously until there is a catastrophic terror event initiated against a nation of the Alliance. As a result we have a paradoxical situation: the world's only superpower is threatened globally and must react globally but is in turn exacerbating seminal differences in intra-Alliance threat perceptions exactly because al Qaeda persists in stopping itself from taking its message of terror directly to another country.

The Sum of all Fears: global terror and WMD

It should be clear from the above discussion that one can identify a proto-trend which describes an increase in lethality of terror attacks over time, at least amongst those targeted against the United States. As a result it is reasonable to posit that since al Qaeda ripped through the envelope of terrorist lethality with its attack almost two years ago that it will wish to obtain tools which ensure for even greater devastation. As a result we arrive at the question of WMD.

In the opinion of this author, two important questions must be raised above all else before WMD desirability is taken as read. The first concerns how we categorise Osama bin Laden himself. Is he truly interested solely in some unfeasible or transcendental aim which would make the use of WMD reasonable? Or do his pronouncements on issues such as Palestine and US troops in the Gulf indicate that he would settle for less than the annihilation of the heretical West? Perhaps we will never know, but the question is no less important for the difficulty of answering it. Secondly we must attempt to balance at least somewhat the Cassandra-like doomsayers that preach inevitable WMD attack based more on terrorist desires than on capability. It is one thing to want a tool and quite another to own it. In this Aum is most illuminating. Now, eight years after the attack, we know in some detail the extent the Japanese cult went to to obtain WMD capability. It actively recruited the necessary scientists and invested several millions of dollars in the creation of various laboratories and production facilities. Nevertheless, after all this the cult was only able to deploy an incredibly weak variant of the weapon sarin (a 10% solution) which killed less than 20 people, or less than could have been achieved by a small to medium size improvised explosive device. As a result, whilst it is clear from the footage of the gassing of a dog, to the studies on weapons chemistry and physics found in Kabul, that al Qaeda is interested in WMD, this does not mean it will have the ability to make and deploy weapons of mass destruction in the near future.



Conclusion

Globalisation as a process is not new. Many an ancient empire can be seen as a form of (limited) globalisation. Even so, the fact that globalisation is now occurring in an environment of interconnected market economies and the spread of one specific model of nation state structuring, namely liberal democracy, means that the actor wishing to exploit the inherent weaknesses of the democratic model, has a broader environment in which to operate. Additionally the attitude of many people nominally belonging to the faith community of Muslim fundamentalism may be swayed by interpretations of the current trends to globalisation that exacerbate the centuries old question of Islam's relations to modernity. Lastly, the fact that the pre-eminent exponent of globalised terrorism at this time has chosen to restrict his actions very much to attacks aimed against one nation results in the fact that existing alliance frameworks may be rent by differing assessments as to whom has most to fear.

If we submit that hyper-terrorism may broaden its range and decide to take on other western nations we will all come to find that the existing tools of national security – whilst adequate to the nation state era of threat – will drastically fall short of finding great utility in the face of an enemy that has neither a nation nor a state against which we can act. In the meantime there is an important potential consequence of an increasing unilateral US employing military tools in nations that do not share its culture, and that is a global increase in potential recruits for extremists such as al Qaeda.

Even so one must not forget that “one swallow doth not a summer make”. The US is rightly preoccupied with ridding the world of a menace that is responsible for the greatest terror attack in modern history. Nevertheless, the existence of one terror organisation that has a global structure and which is invested in attacks that have casualties in the thousands and not the dozens, does not necessarily mean that this is the wave of the future and that classic political violence will be replaced without a doubt by WMD-wielding fundamentalists. Al Qaeda is frightening but unique at the moment. Also it is not a superpower. Its lack of a nation state identity, whilst playing to its favour, at the same time also weakens it since it has limits to its legitimacy and can theoretically be erased. The question now is does the United States have the new tools at its disposal to effect this eradication.? At the moment it seems too locked in a past age and reliant on outmoded means. Change to this state of affairs is not impossible. Let us recall, there was a time when America had a minuscule army, no international intelligence to speak of and knew very, very little about Russia or the USSR, yet nevertheless it still managed to win a Cold War against the USSR. Hopefully it can as a nation reorient itself to the new enemy it currently perceives before Europe too is faced with a similar challenge.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Sebestyén Gorka is Executive Director of the Institute for Transitional Democracy and International Security. He has published in excess of 60 books chapters, monographs and articles internationally on the topics of political violence, military reform, the CIS, intelligence and Central Europe. He has held positions at the RAND Corporation, Washington and was International Research Fellow at the NATO Defence College in Rome. He remains a fellow of the Terrorism Research Center and regularly lectures on the subject of terrorism at the NATO School (SHAPE) in Oberammergau and the FBI's International Law Enforcement Academy, Budapest. Sebestyén Gorka has been a lead contributor to various of the JANES publications for several years. He has appeared on the public and commercial news channels of Austria, Hungary, France, Japan, the US and UK, including the BBC and ABC. He can be contacted at Gorka@compuserve.com .