

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A REVIEW

DIVYA SRIKANTH*
*Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Blk S4, Level B4, Nanyang Avenue
Singapore 639798*

The world underwent seismic shifts in the 20th century in the form of two resource-draining world wars, the creation of a bipolar world order, numerous proxy wars, end of the Cold War and emergence of the US as the sole superpower. However, in the 21st century, the rise of non-state actors, impact of intra-state conflicts, degeneration of the environment, sweeping demographic changes and the rapidly burgeoning cyber-warfare arena have replaced inter-state wars as the main threats to a nation's security in the 21st century.

JEL Codes: F51; H56; Q56.

Key words: Non-traditional Security Threats; Non-state Actors; Demographic Changes; Cyber-warfare; Climate Change; Civil War.

1. Introduction

Unlike the preceding centuries, in which the gravest security threats that a nation-state faced were invariably the armies of other states, in the 21st century, this is no longer the case. The emergence of a number of non-state actors, such as terrorist networks, drug cartels and maritime piracy networks, and intra-state conflicts (e.g. civil wars) have assumed importance as new-age threats to the national security of present-day states. Apart from such non-state and transnational actors, the impact of environmental degradation on the future of the nation-state, especially the implications of global climate change, has emerged as a credible and serious threat to the future existence of modern-day nation-states. Demographical changes, such as an aging and/or shrinking population, especially acute in the Western developed countries, have emerged as the one social factor that might influence global power politics in the future. Finally, technological advancements in the 21st century, particularly with respect to the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution, have facilitated the emergence of cyber-warfare and cyber-espionage, triggering the slow shift of the battlefield from land, air and sea to cyberspace.

*Email: SRIKANTH007@e.ntu.edu.sg; div.srik@gmail.com.

2. Rise of Non-state Actors

The world underwent seismic shifts in the 20th century in the form of two resource-draining world wars, the creation of a bipolar world order, numerous proxy wars, end of the Cold War and emergence of the US as the sole superpower. The formation of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War 2 and its ensuing proclamation that the military forces of member-states could be deployed only for self-defense, collective self-defense or collective security, as identified and legitimized by passing a UN resolution, has resulted in effective “outlawing” of the use of offensive military force by the UN member-states. According to World Bank, the frequency of inter-state and civil wars has now reduced, in comparison with those that were fought in the 20th century. When the UN was established, it was primarily structured to deal with states. However, modern conflict is no longer restricted to only wars between the military forces of states. The rise of organized crime networks (e.g. drug cartels) and terrorist groups in the 21st century has led to a scenario where such non-state actors pose a greater threat to a state’s national security than the military forces of other states.

2.1 Transnational organized crime networks are especially a potent threat to a state’s national security because of a number of reasons. The World Bank (2013) defines an organized crime network as one that uses force and coercion for pursuit of wealth by criminal means. Thus, going by this definition, international drug cartels, arms smuggling groups and maritime piracy networks can be classified as some of the major organized crime networks. Drug cartels have especially gained importance in the last few decades because of their greater access to resources (both financial and organizational) and use of sophisticated technological advancements in order to improve their risk management strategies and thus evade capture by the state security agencies. Organized crime networks usually mushroom and thrive in “weak” or “failed” states (mostly underdeveloped and developing countries), which are characterized by ineffective government control, poor law and order control situation, weak regulatory framework for protecting business activities and a corrupt judiciary. Because these networks are non-state actors, by default, they do not conform to the international laws and treaties that govern a state in its use of force. Non-state actors are neither limited by territorial boundaries, nor do they recognize the concept of sovereignty. As a result, international drug cartels and illegal arms sales networks flout all international rules during their operations. They also use bribery as an effective instrument to attract and/or coerce the very personnel who are employed by the state to combat them. Since state security agencies and police forces in developing and impoverished countries are more susceptible to the lure of bribes, such organized crime networks thrive well in these regions. However, this is not to arrive at the conclusion that organized crime operations flourish only in these regions. The US and European Union serve as the two biggest markets for drugs, and the drug cartels can reap in profits by exclusively focusing on these markets alone. A number of states are “involved” during the trajectory from production to reaching the final destination, categorized by Williams (2014) as follows: “home” state (where the drug originates), the transshipment states (which can be one or more states that are involved in the transit of the drug shipments),

the host or market states and the service state (which usually act as safe havens for illegal financial transactions). The same applies for other organized crime networks such as arms smuggling or the transport of illegal migrants. Thus the networks flout the sovereignty of not one, but many states and also may bribe the authorities involved of multiple states in the process, thereby extending their web of influence and threatening the national security of multiple states at the same time.

It has become increasingly difficult for the state authorities to nab the leaders of such networks. One reason is institutionalized corruption in the state system (e.g. in Colombia), which ensures the “protection” of the leaders. In some cases, charismatic leaders of the organized crime networks even publicly involve themselves in philanthropy and charity, portraying themselves as more efficient and “welfare-oriented” than the local elected government. This is usually effective in the “home” state, where the people usually suffer from poverty, high crime rates and the lax attitude of government authorities in addressing their grievances. The organized crime networks assume the identity of a generous benefactor and protector of the people, thus cultivating a Stockholm Syndrome-like attitude in the general public, who begin to view the state with mistrust and gravitate toward these crime syndicates with their problems, thereby undermining the local police and military force and contributing to the overall degeneration of the national security of the state. Thus the state is made progressively weaker, until the security situations spirals into chaos and the prospect of a civil war may become imminent. The major obstacle to a combating an organized crime network is that, invariably, the state is perceived to be in a weaker position, which, in a way, “legitimizes” the former’s influence. The situation is exacerbated when there is inter- drug-cartel rivalry for supremacy, along with the conflict between the drug cartels and the state government, as is the case in Mexico Drug War.

2.2 Terrorism and insurgency have emerged as the most widely recognizable and visible threats to a nation’s security, especially after the 9/11 attacks. Hoffman (2013) defines terrorism as the “deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or threat of violence in pursuit of political change”. Although terrorist and insurgency groups are similar to organized crime networks in their use (or threat of use) of force to achieve their stated objectives, the most important and fundamental difference is in their *objectives*: while drug cartels and arms smuggling networks primarily operate to increase their wealth, terrorist and insurgency networks always have a political goal. Moreover, insurgency groups differ from terrorist groups in their quest for self-determination and hold over territory, usually fighting the established local government or foreign power, who they perceive to be illegitimate occupying forces. Also, organized crime networks manipulate state machinery to ensure that their businesses flourish, while terrorist groups target the civilian population in order to seek attention to their political demands. The one commonality between transnational organized crime networks and terrorist groups that is also the major source of security threat to a state that harbors such groups is that both are non-state actors, and like the former, terrorist groups do not recognize the concept of state boundaries, sovereignty or international norms and regulations on the use of force. As a result, civilians, diplomats and media persons are routinely targeted by terrorist

groups. The effective use of suicide bombers to target civilians in crowded places, the employment of sophisticated technology and tactics such as leaderless movements (i.e. terrorist organizations that do not have a visible leader), sleeper cells (especially in India) and phantom cell networks have made it increasingly difficult for the governments to wipe off terrorist groups. Also, while the members of a terrorist network, especially suicide bombers, might be thought of as irrational or brain-washed, the leader of the terrorism network is a completely “rational” person. As a result, governments find it increasingly difficult to track down and annihilate terrorist groups and their leaders. Terrorist groups such as the Shining Path (Peru) also tap into the organized crime network in order to set up a highly successful drugs smuggling network to fund their terrorist campaigns. This leads, sometimes, to a blurring of lines between organized crime and terrorism, placing additional pressure on the governments in their combat against such intertwined networks. The most important advantage of a terrorist group is their effective use of the element of surprise, catching the public and the government off guard, especially if they use a neutral territory to conduct a terrorist attack.

Combating terrorism has been hampered by the increased organizational efficiency of terrorist groups (e.g. leaderless networks) and ineffective use of brute force and targeted killings by the state (in Chechnya and Palestine). It would be of note here that the last inter-state war between Israel and an Arab state was nearly 30 years ago, the recent wars that Israel waged were against non-state actors (i.e. Hezbollah and Hamas). Doubts over whether terrorism can completely be annihilated have plagued the minds of counter-terrorist operatives, which also weakens the state’s response to tackle this global threat to security and peace. Thus the threat of terrorism still remains a very important factor that shapes a state’s sense of national security.

3. Civil War and Regime Change

Although the post-World War 2 period saw the establishment and strengthening of the United Nations and the formation of what Jervis (2002) defines a “pluralistic security community” (a term initially coined by Karl Deutsch), comprising a group of nations who fought the previous world wars (i.e. US, the EU and Japan), among whom the breakout of inter-state war is unimaginable, this does not literally translate to a peaceful international community. Apart from wars that are occasionally fought between other states outside the security community, intra-state wars (most importantly, civil wars) still threatens the lives of thousands of civilians caught in conflict. Annan (1998) states that “[m]ost wars are now civil wars”. According to Nye and Welch (2013), 89 of the 113 conflicts in the period between end of cold war and beginning of the 21st century were purely civil wars. Civil wars are more destructive than inter-state wars because of their duration (they usually last longer than inter-state wars), the high number of civilian deaths, instances of the inability of the government to emphatically defeat the rebel groups (if the civil war is between state and non-state actors) and the involvement of different ethnic groups in the conflict. Since civil wars are usually fought between intra-state groups (usually the government and one or more non-state actors), they are classified as internal affairs of states, hence hindering

UN intervention during the initial stages, which might prevent spiraling of the conflict. The Syrian civil war is an example of how the UN and the member-states failed to effectively stop the strife, thereby resulting in the escalation of war to the extent where chemical weapons were used against innocent civilians.

One of the disadvantages of the way the UN has been structured is that it authorizes the use of force to respond only to situations where there is a clear evidence of aggression. In civil wars, as Nye and Welch (2013) argue, identification of the aggressor is not always easy. When UN intervention is not found to be effective enough, sometimes foreign intervention occurs, usually when the situation spirals out of control, as it happened in Libya (Downes, 2011). However, civil wars are inherently recursive in nature. About 40% of states that endured a civil war and a resulting regime change imposed by a foreign power suffered a relapse within a decade. Regime change is usually not effective because of the sudden reversal of fortunes of a particular group involved in the conflict, which the group might object to, usually through violence. Thus civil wars are difficult to end through UN or foreign intervention; usually such conflicts end only when one group has a resounding and complete victory over the others, which might take decades. In the meantime, the law and order situation is thrown into disarray, with rise in crimes and murders. This leads to a situation of “failed states”, where a combination of intra-state war and foreign intervention has resulted in the state government losing control and power over the military establishment or the state in general. There are a number of examples of civil wars resulting in failed states, such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Rwanda. There is also the possibility of “spillover”, where a civil war in one country affects the stability and peace of the neighboring countries as well due to inflow or outflow of refugees, rebel fighters, arms and ammunition into the adjacent states. Thus civil wars invariably lead to regional instability and a degenerating security situation.

4. Impact of Environmental Degradation

One of the most critical issues concerning a nation’s security in the 21st century is environmental degradation, and in particular, climate change and its impact. Rising population and burgeoning energy needs, especially in developed and developing countries, has led to the excessive depletion of natural resources, at a rate much faster than it can be replaced.

Climate change has assumed critical importance to world security in the last few decades. Global warming due to climate change has been predicted to have a cascading affect, wherein the increasing temperatures will facilitate more frequent formation of cyclones and storms in the tropical regions and the melting of polar ice caps, in turn leading to rising sea levels and possible submerging of low-lying areas and island nations, threatening their very existence. Rising temperatures also have the capacity to foster the spread of communicable diseases, such as malaria and cholera, due to increased number of air-borne and water-borne vector carriers. Thus climate change is a serious cause for concern to nation, since it is the fountainhead for various other natural and related phenomena that may threaten the very existence of the human race in the decades to come.

Dwindling fresh water resources has led to many scholars predicting inter-state “water wars” in the future. For example, Dupont (2013) points out that China has resorted to diverting fresh water resources from Tibet to the water-scarce Northern China region, thereby affecting millions of livelihoods in the riparian regions from which the water was redirected. Such endeavors may not only affect the environment but also lead to deteriorating relations with the neighboring countries that would be adversely affected by one state’s quest for fresh water resources. Thus water scarcity is a critical national security issue for states, and is the best example of a “tragedy of the commons” as postulated by Hardin (1968), wherein overpopulation and a “free-riding mentality” may result in the degeneration and pollution of a resource.

Climate change may also affect agricultural production due to disruption of normal climate caused by increasing temperatures. Food scarcity is an issue that has been touted to be the most important problems that will be faced by the states in the future. Inflation in food prices is already a reality, especially in developing countries which have dense populations. Although predictions of a food deficit have not yet turned true, this cannot be ruled out in the future, as a rapidly increasing population will place additional strain on the finite land resource and the excessive use of fertilizers might result in soil infertility due to chemical imbalance.

Energy security is and will be one of the primary factors that will drive the foreign policy of nations. Since oil, gas and coal are non-renewable sources of energy, states are expected to resort to nuclear energy in the future in order to fulfill their energy needs. This will lead to the problem of nuclear waste disposal and protection of the nuclear fuel from non-state terrorist and criminal organizations which might misuse it to manufacture nuclear weapons. Resource wars cannot be ruled out, as states might not hesitate to use offensive force in order to secure its energy needs for the future. An example is Russia’s recent stunt at “claiming” the Arctic seabed, a region which is being eyed by many states, such as the US, Canada, Norway and Denmark, due to the unexploited resources that it holds (Dupont, 2013).

Environmental refugees may soon become a reality, as environmental degradation and food and water scarcity may lead to mass migration of populations from the affected regions, contributing to the instability of the host states. Thus environment protection and nurturing is an urgent need of the hour, as a destabilized environment can lead to a tipping point, after which catastrophic and irreversible consequences, such as increase in the number of natural disasters, may threaten the survival of the state and its population.

5. Demographic Changes and Their Consequences

While over-population is a legitimate concern and, in some cases, already a reality in the developing and underdeveloped regions of the world, the developed world is at the threshold of a sweeping demographic change, with a simultaneously ageing and shrinking population, a consequence of decreasing fertility rates and increasing life expectancy over the last few decades. As a result, Howe and Jackson (2011) expect that, by 2025, the

population in Western Europe and Japan will predominantly comprise the elderly, with a rapidly decreasing workforce. This will increase the strain on government resources, which will need to be diverted to provide care and assistance for the ageing population, while at the same time being constrained by a shrinking working-age population being unable to offset the deficit. This demographic transition may be partially assuaged by the migrant working population from the developing and underdeveloped countries, however, their integration into the society may not be smooth, due to the prospect of ethnic tensions and religious extremism. A greater proportion of the national budget will be allocated for social welfare, which might directly impact the defense spending of the nation and compromising national security.

China's rise as a possible challenger to the US hegemony is being advocated by many scholars; however, the one-child policy that has been rigorously enforced by the ruling Communist Party of China for the past four decades has resulted in the premature aging of its population. Howe and Jackson (2011) predict that, by 2030, China would have surpassed the US as the country with the greater proportion of the elderly population. Also, they expect Russia to face the sharpest decline in population among the large states. Although some regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa might have a burgeoning young population, the combination of political instability and impoverishment would prevent the population from effectively contributing to their nations' economies. An aging and shrinking population would also translate into a reduction in the military capacity of a state due to shortage of personnel. Thus, it is only logical that a dynamic change in the age and size of population directly affect a state's national security, even with the development of sophisticated weapons technology.

6. Cyber-conflict and National Security

The 21st century has been labeled as the Information Age, where civilians are being able to have unprecedented access to information. However, the information and communication technology (ICT) "revolution" has transformed the way information is used, transmitted and stored not only by the civilian population but also the state military and intelligence agencies. As a result, a new battlefield has opened up: cyberspace. Cyber-conflict and cyber-exploitation are the new threats to a state's security. And similar to a traditional kinetic conflict (TKC), both offensive and defensive acts take place in the cyber-arena (Lin, 2013). During a cyber-conflict, there are no clear lines between the civilian and military, as civilian computer systems may be used to launch offensive cyber-war against an "enemy" state. Also, the difficulty is determining the perpetrator (which could be state or non-state actors) adds to the confusion in determining the legal course of action once a cyber-attack is discovered. A spate of cyber-attacks have been reported by the media, especially in the last few years: China, Israel and the US are thought to routinely engage in cyber-conflicts with other states in order to siphon confidential business or military information (i.e. cyber-exploitation) or prevent/stun rival military systems from functioning properly (i.e. cyber-conflict).

Cyber-war is especially a serious threat to the national sovereignty and security because it transcends national borders and involves use of civilian resources (such as broadband

networks and electric grids) and, sometimes, malignant non-state actors such as organized crime networks and fringe extremist groups that hack into national databases and steal classified information, in many cases without being discovered. The reverberations of an intrusive cyber-attack are hard to predict. Unlike TKC, where deterrence, dissuasion and defense are said to be more advantageous than offense, in cyber-conflict, it is the opposite. Also, in TKC, the enemy can be “seen” or “identified”; this is not the case in cyber-warfare. As Lin (2013) states, cyber-defense has to work every single time whereas cyber-offense needs to work only once. Cyber-conflict need not necessarily be restricted only to those between states or between non-state actors and states. Drug cartels, arms smuggling networks and many other illegal businesses routinely use ICT to carry out under-the-radar financial transactions, using the illegal wealth to further strengthen their influence, contributing to a weakening of the state’s security.

Although the number of instances of cyber-attacks and cyber-exploitation by state and non-state actors is low at present compared to, say, intra- or inter-state wars, they still pose a credible threat to the national security of 21st century states, mainly because of the relative anonymity of the perpetrators, absence of explicit UN legislation on cyber-warfare (unlike TKC) and the possibility of escalation of cyber-conflict. Also, since there has been no precedent, one cannot predict what might be the possibility or consequence of a cyber-world-war, which may not necessarily involve only states.

7. Conclusion

This paper thus argues that rise of non-state actors, intra-state wars, environmental degradation and climate change, demographical changes and cyber-conflict pose a greater security threat to the nation-states in the 21st century than armies of other states. According to Nye and Welch (2013), two of the important means of preventing and managing conflict and increasing cooperation are international laws and organizations, such as the UN. However, these laws and institutions are tailored to dealing only with states; they do not have provisions for organized crime networks or terrorist organizations. The “tragedy of the commons” has resulted in the overexploitation of natural resources without any heed for allowing for their replenishment, for “temperance is much harder to achieve than deterrence”. Developed states are highly reluctant to voluntarily stunt their economic growth by adhering to the Kyoto Protocol, and developing states are unwilling to compromise on their new-found economic successes. This has led to a stalemate in terms of tackling the impact of climate change. Demographical changes are an important flash-point that might make or break the power politics of a state in the future. Cyber-warfare may be in its nascent stage, but when used, its potency has been validated (e.g. the Stuxnet attacks reportedly carried out by US and Israel against Iranian nuclear infrastructure). It is also highly attractive to state and non-state actors as an effective supplement to traditional conflict methods because of their cost-effectiveness and absence of direct loss of human life during the course of operations. All these new threats to a state’s national security fall outside the perimeter of traditional conflicts. As Nye and Welch put it, the global stage is becoming crowded, and states are not the only actors anymore in a dynamic international

political stage. As a result, states find it increasingly difficult and complicated in tackling these new-age conflicts, not because the rules of the game have changed, but because there are no rules to begin with, in the first place.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Prof Evan Resnick for his comments on the initial draft of the paper and Prof Rajesh S. Basrur for his guidance. I would also like to express my gratitude to the staff at RSIS Library, especially Ms Chong Yee Ming, for their patience and help during the preparation of this manuscript. Any errors are solely mine.

Bibliography

- Annan, Kofi.** 1998. "Reflections on Intervention." Speech delivered at the Thirty Fifth Annual Ditchley Foundation Lecture. Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/1998/19980626.sgsm6613.html>.
- Cronin, Audrey Kurth.** 2011. *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Downes, B. Alexander.** 2011. "To the Shores of Tripoli? Regime Change and Its Consequences." *Boston Review* 36:5 (September/October).
- Hardin, Garrett.** 1968. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162:1243–1248.
- Hoffman, Bruce.** 2013. "What is Terrorism?" In *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 11th Edition, edited by Robert Art and Robert Jervis, New York: Pearson.
- Howe, Neil and Richard Jackson.** 2011. "Global Aging and the Crisis of the 2020s." CSIS. https://csis.org/files/publication/110104_gai_jackson.pdf.
- Jervis, Robert.** 2002. "Theories of War in an Era of Leading Power Peace." *American Political Science Review* 96:1–14.
- Lin, Herbert.** 2013. "Cyber Conflict and National Security." In *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 11th Edition, edited by Robert Art and Robert Jervis, New York: Pearson.
- Nye, Joseph S Jr and David A Welch.** 2013. "Managing Conflict." In *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History*. New York: Pearson.
- Williams, Phil.** 2014. "Transnational Organized Crime and the State." In *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance*. 1st edition, edited by Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J Biersteker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The World Bank.** 2013. "Shape of Violence Today." In *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 11th Edition, edited by Robert Art and Robert Jervis, New York: Pearson.