



Trends in Conflict 2010-2030

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1. Introduction

The Cold War was a 40-year period that, apart from the wars of decolonisation, dominated attitudes to international security. Looking to the future, though, it may be that the wars of decolonisation will prove a better guide to trends in conflict.

At the end of the Cold War, in the early 1990s, there was an expectation of a more peaceful “new world order” but that was quickly dashed by the Iraq War of 1991, bitter conflicts in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Somalia, and the genocidal conflict in Rwanda. Partly because of the incidence of particularly costly internal conflicts, there was a widespread perception that a major change in the nature of warfare was in progress, the trend being from international to internal conflicts.

This apparent trend is believed to be an indicator for the future but it may well be misleading. The Cold War era was actually characterised, in part, by numerous internal conflicts, even if one or other (and often both) of the superpowers had an indirect role in supporting a party to the conflict.

During the course of the 1990s there were indeed many internal conflicts, but very many of these also had substantial international connections. Furthermore, the post-9/11 environment is certainly one in which international and trans-national conflict has come notably to the fore. It is therefore inadvisable to concentrate on the idea of the increasing probability of internal conflicts.

2. Parameters of Conflict

This paper is concerned principally with a rather more long-term assessment of trends in conflict and will concentrate on the period from 2010 to 2030. While this involves a degree

of speculation, it has a value in requiring one to embrace major trends and tendencies that might not otherwise be considered relevant in responding to short-term issues.

At the same time, attempting to assess longer-term trends is aided by placing some emphasis on current developments and potential parameters of insecurity that are already in place. The assessment here reflects such parameters but adds in some more speculative variables in order to broaden the possibilities.

The paper also notes the value of scenario planning as a tool for analysing trends in conflict and suggests ways in which such planning might be useful in responding to a potentially fractured, insecure and unpredictable international security environment.

There are three global issues that are emerging as likely determinants of international insecurity and violence:

- the weapons proliferation legacy of the Cold War
- increasingly bitter socio-economic divisions
- global environmental constraints.

Early in the 21st century, the key issue is whether the elite states of the world can respond to such problems in order to promote greater security and stability. This is further accentuated by the impact of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington and President Bush's subsequent "war on terror". It is most likely that elite states will not respond with the appropriate policies and that these three parameters of conflict will be the main "drivers" in the period 2010 to 2030.

3. Proliferation

The end of the Cold War resulted in a partial peace dividend as some of the leading players cut back their defence budgets. The former Soviet states went furthest in this process but they and their western counterparts were keen to maintain their arms industries, and these were activities that could only be sustained by developing thriving export markets. One consequence of this was the pronounced tendency for states to use official or unofficial marketing systems to export a wide range of weapons, including new generations of area-impact munitions such as advanced cluster bombs and multiple-launch rocket systems – conventional weapons with devastating potential.

These, together with cruise and ballistic missiles presented serious problems of proliferation for powerful states such as the US, and there were added concerns about the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, especially as there was so much expertise available for hire from the former Soviet Union. Overall, this powerful legacy of the Cold War makes ordinary conflict potentially more damaging and also makes it more likely that weaker states might be able to resist interventions in a way that has not previously been considered likely.

Although "official" arms markets are currently rather more lucrative because of increased defence spending in the United States, current trends in arms exports are likely to continue and there are few prospects for the development of agreements for the multilateral control of arms transfers. WMD technologies are also proliferating, as shown by the recent activities of elements of the Pakistani nuclear weapons establishment. Furthermore, the era of mass casualty terrorism brought in by Aum Shinrikyo, the LTTE, al-Qaida and others in the 1990s

makes it possible that some WMD such as radiological weapons may be used in the coming decades.

Alongside this, the failure to move towards general and complete nuclear disarmament is actually being paralleled by the development of new nuclear strategies, not least by the United States, that involve an increased readiness to consider the use of nuclear weapons in conflicts that fall far short of a global nuclear confrontation.

Finally, the potential for developing advanced biological and chemical weapons is such that these should be expected to play a significant role in conflict in the 2010-2030 period. It has not proved possible to strengthen the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, so that while such weapons are banned there are no verification and transparency standards.

Rapid developments in genetic modification and biotechnology in the civil sector will therefore make it relatively easy to ensure that advanced biological warfare agents can be developed. These may include "tailored" organisms selected for their pathogenicity and resistance to counter-measures, organisms selected for their impact on particular ethnic groups, and self-destructive organisms of limited time-span.

Concerning the development of chemical agents, the most fertile area relates to mind-control. Rapid recent developments in a range of pharmaceuticals are leading to the possible production of agents with a wide range of effects on human behaviour. Moreover, such developments may currently involve advanced laboratory and research technologies but should have the capacity, in due course, for use by sub-state groups.

In short, proliferation of conventional and non-conventional weapons is not under control, arms transfers should routinely ensure the spread of advanced weapons to zones of conflict, a range of weapons of mass destruction may become more widely available and all of this is in the context of sub-state actors having an increased capability to use more advanced systems, not least in engaging in mass casualty terrorism.

4. Socio-Economic Divisions

The second trend, and almost certainly the most serious in terms of security, is the deepening global socio-economic divide. Over the past four decades there has been substantial economic growth. The extent of this economic growth, and the technological developments and improvements in material well-being have been remarkable and compare very favourably with any other period in the past several centuries. Moreover, there have been improvements, for most of the recent decades, in almost all regions of the world.

At the same time, the extent of the change has been highly variable, with a very heavy concentration of growth in relatively few parts of the world. In broad terms, about one fifth of the global population has seen quite remarkable improvements in material well-being, so much so that this part of the human community has tended to surge rapidly ahead of the rest. The geographical concentration of wealth is far from absolute, and extends from the Atlantic community and parts of the West Pacific to substantial elite communities in countries such as India, Brazil and Mexico.

In parallel with this, the great majority of the world's people are effectively marginalised, with well over two billion impoverished to the extent of surviving on less than two dollars a

day. On its own, such a trend may have little relevance to paramilitary action and other forms of conflict, but there appears to be a second factor at work that at least relates this to radical social movements and insurgencies that may, in turn, have substantial relevance. That factor concerns significant changes in the provision of education and communications.

Although the process of development has been variable and disparate, one feature of the post-colonial era has been a substantial effort to improve primary education and literacy. This has resulted in a much larger proportion of the population of Southern states being literate and having general levels of knowledge of their overall economic and socio-political environment. Coupled with this have been more recent improvements in communications, including the much wider availability of the broadcast media and, admittedly in its very early stages in the South, access to the Internet and other electronic media.

What this tends to support is a much greater awareness of personal and community predicaments and perceptions of marginalisation. Moreover, the combination of current economic and demographic trends with continued improvements in communications indicate that these perceptions will increase rather than decrease. In particular, demographic trends help ensure that there are very large numbers of young people, particularly young men, who are marginalised into unemployment with few long-term prospects. As such they can be readily recruited into radical social movements.

What is surprising is that such a global trend is largely unrecognised by most people who are within the elite sector of the global population. Even in an age of mass intercontinental travel, there is a "cocoon effect" in which people rarely engage outside their own socio-economic environment, not least when pursuing vacations in game parks or on tropical beaches or engaging in business visits in modern city centres.

5. Environmental Constraints

The final determinant of potential conflict is the developing phenomenon of global environmental constraints. This has long been predicted, certainly back to the *Limits to Growth* debate of thirty years ago, but is now much more clearly apparent, as is the realisation that it has profound security implications.

There are two broad areas of concern. One is the potential for increased conflict over resources, especially those of a strategic significance that have a small location base such as industrial diamonds or some ferro-metals such as cobalt. There are also concerns over the availability of adequate water supplies. In some parts of the world, water politics already intrudes into zones in conflict, most notably on the West Bank of the Jordan.

Even more significant is the location of world oil reserves, with some two-thirds of all known reserves located in the Persian Gulf region. Moreover, most of the most easily obtainable reserves are located there, new reserves are being discovered at a faster rate than production, and the reserves are amongst the cheapest in the world. Over the period 2010-2030, dependence of all the major industrialised and industrialising states, including China and India, on Gulf oil will increase markedly.

The 1991 Gulf War was fought primarily over the control of Gulf oil, as was the more recent Iraq War, and much of the anti-American mood from which the al-Qaida network and others have drawn their support comes from a perception of consequent US control of the Gulf and

support for a neo-feudal Saudi elite, in addition to the current process of establishing a client regime in Baghdad. It is commonly noted in the region that there were two quite separate developments in Iraq in March/April 2003 – one was the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime and the other was the success of the United States in increasing its control of oil reserves by 400%.

The second area of environmental concern lies with global human impacts, an early marker being the impact of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) pollutants on the ozone layer, a problem appreciated in the early 1980s, not least because of the activities of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The Montreal Convention of 1987 was a welcome if partial response to that but of much greater long-term significance is the phenomenon of climate change, caused primarily by the emission of 'greenhouse' gases, especially carbon dioxide, from the burning of fossil fuels. Since the use of fossil fuels is an integral part of urban industrial societies, the control of such greenhouse gases is likely to prove very much more difficult than responding to ozone depletion.

Until a few years ago, most forms of climate change were expected to have their main effects on temperate latitudes, regions of relative wealth that might be able to cope. More recently, there has developed a view within climatology that the tropics will also be affected, both in terms of violent weather events causing great harm to impoverished communities, and a more general tendency for changes in rainfall distribution.

There are now indications that, over the next half century, the tropical regions of the world will experience substantial shifts in the distribution of rainfall, with more rain tending to fall on the oceans and the polar regions and progressively less rain falling over the tropical land masses. The likely effects include the partial drying-out of some of the most fertile regions of the tropics, leading to a substantial decrease in the ecological carrying-capacity of the land, resulting in decreases in food production.

These are the areas that support a very substantial part of the human population, much of it by subsistence agriculture. Many of the communities are very poor, and form part of impoverished states that have very little capacity to respond to such fundamental changes. As a result, the likelihood of persistent food shortages and even famines become much greater, leading to increased human suffering, social unrest and a greatly increased pressure on migration.

6. Responses to Divisions

For the most part, an increasing socio-economic divide tends to lead to social instability demonstrated by rising crime levels and a greater concern by elite communities with their own security. There is also, though, abundant evidence that it can lead to more organised radical social movements, some of which espouse anti-elite insurgency and political violence and many of which draw their leaderships from relatively well-educated sectors of their communities.

One strong example of this has been the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas Province of Mexico that started in 1994. A rebel source gave reasons for the revolt in terms that would be recognised in many parts of the world:

We have nothing, absolutely nothing – not decent shelter, nor land, nor work, nor health, nor food, nor education. We do not have the right to choose freely and democratically our officials. We have neither peace nor justice for ourselves and our children. But today we say enough!

The Zapatista revolt is one of a number of insurgencies and periods of disorder that have been a feature of the past two decades, some of which have involved the use of terror and counter-terror. Each has its own socio-economic circumstances and in each case the radical social movements have at their core particular ideologies or beliefs. There is no single trend in relation to these, but it is certainly arguable that socio-economic divisions are relevant in a significant number of cases.

The Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrilla movement in Peru developed from the quasi-Maoist ideas espoused and taught by Abimael Guzman in the 1970s, gaining support and taking root among marginalised communities in the High Andes and the slums of Lima. Its brutal methods, and the counter-terror used by the Peruvian Army, resulted in a two-decade conflict that killed 25,000 people and also involved SL bombing campaigns aimed at the Lima elite.

SL was hugely aided in its development by the deep divisions within Peru, and this has also been a feature of support for paramilitary movements in Southern Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. While Hizbullah developed primarily in response to the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon from 1982 to 1985, and while it has been partly sustained by support from Iran and Syria, it also stems from the long-term position of the Shi'ite communities of Southern Lebanon as the most marginalised, if still the largest, of Lebanon's confessional communities.

Similarly, the radical Palestinian groups active in the West Bank, and Hamas in Gaza, draw support from very large sectors of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories. While there are complex religious motives for much of the support, there is abundant evidence of a connection with two wider issues with an international resonance. One is the economic marginalisation of Palestinians over several decades, a situation made very much worse in recent years. The other is the high levels of education among the supporters of the movements - secondary and higher education in the occupied territories, with numerous high schools and many universities compares favourably with many western countries and has produced a literate and knowledgeable population with a very strong sense of marginalisation.

There are parallels also with Algeria where incompetent and corrupt governance in the 1980s lead to unrest, repression and a state of emergency, eventually resulting in a cautious move towards democracy that was ended by military intervention in 1991/92 to prevent an Islamist party taking power. From this developed a bitter conflict costing 100,000 lives and involving frequent paramilitary actions, some of them in France. The point here, though, is that the Algerian experience has been fuelled by the economic marginalisation of a large majority of the population, often centring on young men leaving secondary education with no further prospects.

The Maoist revolt in Nepal has also been made more potent by the ability of the insurgents to gain support from substantial sectors of the rural population. There are bitter disagreements over the efficiency and responsiveness of the political system since the re-establishment of partial multi-party parliamentary activity in 1990, but most analysts would agree that Nepal

combines inherent problems of poverty with deep internal socio-economic divisions and corruption, and that these have aided the development and maintenance of the insurgency.

7. A Global Trend?

A key question is whether there is evidence of a global trend towards paramilitary violence and anti-elite actions, given that prior to 1995 there would have appeared to have been a decrease in incidents of terrorism. Indeed, are we entering an era that is somewhat akin to the period of the wars of decolonisation after 1945? At that time, there were numerous insurgencies and other forms of radical activity against colonial powers. They were not formally transnational, but there were frequently links between anti-colonial movements, there were “learning curves” and there was also, in some circumstances, support for anti-colonial movements from the Soviet bloc countered by support for colonising powers from the wider western community.

It is possible that al-Qaida and its associates, with their capacity to demonstrate trans-national capabilities for political violence, could be an early symptom of a trend towards insurgencies, bearing in mind that many supporters of al-Qaida and its associated groups come from the margins, however well educated their leaders may be. For now we cannot be sure, but some issues are already reasonably clear.

The first is that anti-elite movements do not have strictly common features but may instead have recourse to a range of possible political, religious, nationalist or ethical justifications. There is a tendency to focus on religious fundamentalism, especially in Islam. While this is understandable in the context of the activity of al-Qaida and its associates, it may miss the wider trend of which these groups may form one part.

The second is that anti-elite and politically violent movements may be more prevalent in poorer states but recent events demonstrate a potential trans-national capability. Moreover, this can provide a “learning curve” for movements, and their own development can be aided by attempts by authorities to control them that involve a human rights cost that can fuel further recruitment and support for the paramilitaries.

Thirdly, there is a “majority world” view that sees current global developments as little short of a maintenance of an international economic and political hegemony focused primarily on the United States and its western allies. That this view exists, that it is pervasive across much of the world, and that it can provide a degree of sympathy with, and sometimes even support for, radical social movements, is almost entirely unrecognised in the Atlantic community.

Finally, it would appear that the deepening socio-economic divisions, coupled with the development of a largely unacceptable yet uni-polar world should be expected to witness the persistent development of radical social movements including those extending their actions to political violence.

Recognition that fundamental responses to global divisions are essential was growing prior to 9/11, not least with a questioning of the dubious success of the globalised free market. It extended to the perceived need for action on major global issues such as trade reform, debt relief and a much-heightened emphasis on sustainable development.

The combination of the election of the Bush administration with the traumatic impact of 9/11 on an already unilateralist administration in Washington has tended to produce a much harder security outlook in the United States, focussing on the need to win a "war on terror" and take pre-emptive action against presumed threats. At the same time, interest in sustainable global development has declined so that immediate prospects for effective responses have diminished.

This, though, remains an outlook limited primarily to the United States, whereas major initiatives such as the World Social Forum, as well as the more positive attitudes of many European powers, both suggest that a genuine security agenda has not been sidelined to the extent feared a year or so ago.

Moreover, the continuing problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, together with the failure to control the activities of al-Qaida and its associates, both lend support to the view that the time for a re-appraisal of existing US security policies may be approaching faster than might have been expected. There is therefore some prospect of substantive progress on the key issues of international insecurity that currently face us, and, as a consequence, some room for cautious optimism.

In addition, there are areas of technological innovation that could yet have a transforming effect. Energy storage through efficient fuel cells, coupled with the rapid change over to renewable energy sources such as photo-voltaics could radically improve the capability to control greenhouse gas emissions, and a very wide range of advanced appropriate technologies could become available to aid sustainable development.

8. Probable Futures

While such transforming developments are possible, it is wiser to assume that current trends in the three areas will continue, that socio-economic divisions will worsen, that environmental constraints will become more serious and that military technologies will proliferate. We should concede that what is most likely is an environment described graphically by Edwin Brookes over thirty years ago:

A crowded glowering planet of massive inequalities of wealth, buttressed by stark force yet endlessly threatened by desperate people in the global ghettos.

The "stark force" of Brookes has been described as "liddism", or keeping the lid on dissent. This is, in essence, the current western security paradigm, just as the response to 9/11 and al-Qaida is essentially militaristic rather than including an attempt to analyse where such a group draws its support and how it may be countered at root.

Assuming, therefore, that the 2010-2030 period involves an extension of current trends, we should anticipate the following forms of conflict. A widespread if unpredictable phenomenon will be the evolution of a range of radical and often violent social movements, frequently transnational in development as well as impact. They will be essentially anti-elite movements that may have a focus in religious beliefs, ethnic identity, nationalism, political ideology or a complex mix of these.

They may arise almost anywhere, but will most commonly do so where people live in less than abject poverty yet have a clear perspective on their own marginalisation. Sendero, al-

Qaida and its affiliates, the Nepalese Maoists and Hizbollah are all current examples, but there may be a coalescence into multi-confessional and multi-identity movements. Some will embark on mass casualty attacks and may embrace chemical, biological or radiological weapons. Elite society reactions will be harsh and sustained, and elite societies will tend to fear the "other", leading to substantial problems of community and race relations that may in turn further alienate those marginalised.

Socio-economic divisions combined with the effects of tropical climate change are likely to massively exacerbate current pressures of population movements as people seek to move to more successful economies. Militant migration (as in the Albania/Italy incidents in 1991) will be a feature of North/South relations. Migratory pressures will result in more strict border controls as well as the further rise of anti-immigrant political organisations in elite societies. Failed migration may further enhance the development of radical social movements.

Particular regions will be especially prone to sub-state and state-level violent interactions, the prime candidates by far being the rich oil-bearing regions of South West and Central Asia. The successful control of such regions to ensure uninterrupted supplies will be a prime security aim of western elite states.

9. Implications for Mediation

The trends indicated here are by no means entirely new – they are more the concentrated development of some of those that are already in evidence. They are likely to lead to a number of conflicts that may, on occasions, be amenable to a degree of mediation by third parties, much as some conflicts already are. When processes of mediation are involved, though, the current dilemma will be retained – does attempted mediation resolve immediate conflicts without addressing underlying causes?

The problem in the period in question is that the security issues that will be evolving will require fundamental changes in elite society behaviour, preferably in advance of the major conflicts and instabilities developing. If short-term mediation militates against such action, it may serve to exacerbate rather than curtail dangerous trends.

Such a "conflict" between addressing symptoms and causes is not easily resolved, and it is here that techniques of scenario planning may be of use. Such planning would involve the development of possible futures through creating realistic stories that seek to integrate some of the components already discussed. The emphasis here is not on making particular predictions, but rather on exploring alternative possibilities, using them to think creatively about productive responses.

In seeking to analyse the security predicaments that may arise in the 2010-2030 period, we will have to endeavour to integrate the often complex interactions of socio-economic divisions with environmental constraints taking place in a militarised environment in which there will be a presumption of the maintenance of elite control. At the same time, though, trends in asymmetric warfare may negate many traditional forms of military control.

Perhaps the fundamental aspect of the difficulties ahead is that responses are required some years in advance of the development of the conflicts. While precise details of the problems cannot be discerned, there are sufficient indications available for us to be able to develop

realistic scenarios that may help us explore creative alternatives to potential future conflicts. Given the nature of their experience, those concerned with mediation may be particularly well suited to engage in such exploration.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Professor Paul Rogers BSc PhD Lond., DIC ARCS, MIBiol., has contributed this working paper to the HD Centre for the purposes of the 2004 Mediators' Retreat. The opinions expressed in the paper are the author's own.

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