

War and Other Disasters: A Holistic Approach to Security Strategy

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Abstract

Security strategy involves more than military and policing considerations. In this complex, interconnected 21st Century world it needs to adopt what the emergency management profession would call an “all-hazards” approach that includes, for example, environmental and economic issues. Most importantly, it needs to adapt to contemporary circumstances by aiming toward mutual confidence and cooperation rather than continuing the increasingly dysfunctional reliance on military competition and armed conflict.

What is Security?

There can be little argument with the proposition that security is a vitally important priority of any responsible government. As Joseph Nye once suggested, “security is like oxygen – you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs there is nothing else that you will think about”(1). Unfortunately, however, security analysis is too often restricted to its military or policing aspects. The problem with that approach can be illustrated by three examples. Imagine being informed that, from this moment on, there is a strong possibility that your home and family might be wiped off the map suddenly, violently and without warning. Would you feel relieved if you were then told that the threat is from a tsunami instead of an enemy bomb? Of course not – the insecurity is undiminished. Similarly, if you were told that there is a good chance that you, or someone you love, will die very soon, would you feel any less insecure knowing that the threat is an avian influenza pandemic rather than bio-terrorism? Or if you face the prospect of being penniless and having to beg on the street, will you feel somehow less insecure because the cause is an economic collapse instead of displacement by advancing troops? Again, obviously not. So it is clear that security has economic and environmental, as well as defence and policing aspects. And yet, at most conferences devoted to “security” (including the security panel at this one), representation from the environmental and economic disciplines tends to be noticeable by its absence, just as military and police are rarely active in economic and environment discussions. This suggests that a critical re-examination of the definition of security might be in order.

The trouble with a security strategy based on competition for superiority over a present or potential adversary is that it is ultimately a zero-sum, win-lose game. Achieving a feeling of security for one party inevitably means generating feelings of insecurity in the other. The result can be a futile spiral of ever-greater effort to produce ever-diminishing returns. That in turn means expending finite resources that could be better used to address non-military and non-criminal threats to security. This is not to dismiss such important maritime security measures as the Container and Proliferation Security initiatives, the International Ship and Port Security Code, Ballistic Missile Defense, or the many other national and international steps taken around

the world, especially since September 11th 2001. Nonetheless, it is a fallacy to think that such measures alone will lead to the desired result. The strongest fortress cannot engender a sense of security if a viable threat continues to exist outside, even if that threat has only a tiny chance of penetrating the defences. This conference itself provided an example, as foreign guests were accommodated in a hotel selected for its high level of physical security that, ironically, also make it an attractive iconic target. The reasons for this arrangement were sensible and necessary under present circumstances, but that does not make them a desirable long-term solution. Ultimately, true security means the ability to walk freely and safely around the streets of Karachi and mix with the city's vibrant and hospitable people.

The words "defence" and "security" are often used interchangeably but they are not the same. "Defence" means protection or resistance against attack, which is precisely what the post-9/11 initiatives aim to do. On the other hand, "security" is the desired end state. The definitions for "security" in almost all English language dictionaries use the word "confidence". As I have written elsewhere:

Security means having confidence that one will wake up safely in the morning, can go about one's business in peace, and can raise one's family with reasonable prospects of prosperity and happiness. Maritime security means confidence that legitimate trade will flow predictably and unhindered; that the sea remains, in Mahan's phrase, a "great common" and not an avenue for attack. It means confidence that the ocean's resources upon which we all depend can be used responsibly and safely, and that the life support system which it represents remains functional (2).

Statistics and Security

Suggesting that security should not be based on a fortress mentality is not to suggest being naive about the genuine threats that exist in a volatile world. As Winston Churchill once said: "Virtuous motives, trammelled by inertia and timidity are no match for armed and resolute wickedness." Nonetheless, not everyone is wicked, even within nations considered to be "enemy". The Pareto Principle (usually called the "80/20 Rule") is named for a 19th Century economist who noted that 80% of what a person accomplishes usually results from 20% of the effort that they expend. That ratio is surprisingly consistent in other human behavioural contexts. Business people often find that about 80% of their revenue is generated by 20% of the clients. Police will find that approximately 80% of the crimes are committed by 20% of the criminals. Naval Divisional Officers will know that 80% of their administrative problems usually come from only 20% of their sailors (3). Those who are tempted to demonize entire societies because of the behaviour of a few would do well to remember Pareto.

There is a bookshop in Halifax (Canada) that displays its military titles under the heading of "War and Other Disasters". Perhaps that is not a bad paradigm for understanding security in the 21st Century. Looking at the historical record, only 2.3% of the deaths by disaster during the 20th Century were the result of rapid onset disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis. Another 11.6% were the victim of epidemics and 16.1% succumbed to slow onset disasters like drought and famine. It was political violence, however, that took the greatest toll, accounting for more than half – 62.4% – of all the deaths by disaster (4). Perhaps, then, there might be something to be learned from examining political violence from the perspective of the emergency management field.

Security as a Disaster Management Issue

The emergency (or disaster) management profession has grown rapidly during the past three or four decades, from its roots in Cold War civil defence to its extensive contemporary scope

ranging from natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes to technological disasters such as hazardous material spills and air crashes (5). A holistic security strategy would do well to consider the “all-hazards” approach that emergency managers use routinely. This is not as radical or original a suggestion as it might sound. Indonesia, for example, has reportedly included natural disaster as a factor in its national security strategy since natural hazards are likely to cause the death of more Indonesian citizens than any foreseeable external military aggression. Other tools such as the hazard, risk and vulnerability assessment (HRVA) methodology used by emergency managers could be a useful counterpoint to the more traditional military and policing approach of threat analysis. After all, the word “threat” implies the existence of a threatening human adversary, while the word “risk” is less judgmental. Risk is the result of an equation that measures the interaction of factors such as hazard, likelihood of occurrence and vulnerability of those likely to be affected. That might be a useful basis upon which to conduct a holistic security strategic analysis.

A Holistic Approach to Security

While war and lesser political violence will always threaten society, other hazards cannot be neglected. Notwithstanding the 20th century statistics quoted earlier, Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon has pointed out that in the 21st century: “The danger posed by war to all humanity and to our planet is at least matched by the climate crisis and global warming”(6). The stress that we are imposing on our planet’s life support system may not be a military or internal security issue, but it is certainly one that affects the quality of life, and possibly even the survival, of our species.” If such lessons as the rapidly collapsing cod stocks on Canada’s Grand Banks are any indication, the time may soon come when human squabbles over ideology or territory may be as inconsequential as arguing over who gets what deck-chair aboard a sinking ship. As any sailor knows, you may dislike your shipmate intensely, but when the ship is showing signs of breaking up, there are more important things to consider. The crew aboard what Buckminster Fuller called ‘Spaceship Earth’ has yet to respond vigorously to the ominous signals of impending trouble”(7).

Synthesis

This conference explored maritime threats (or more precisely, hazards) and opportunities under three broad headings - economics, the environment and security - and aimed to identify the linkages between them. One way of doing this is with an analogy. If we look at this fragile little planet as our home, then the environment represents its foundation - if it rots then the entire structure collapses. Economics represents our day-to-day life within its walls. Security, in all its aspects, is the roof. Unless we are sheltered from storms, the foundation weakens, our livelihood is interrupted and our lives become untenable. Each of these elements is inextricably related to the others and cannot be analysed in any meaningful way in isolation.

As the multinational participation in this conference has illustrated, we can no longer afford the luxury of viewing security strategy through the narrow lens of nationalism. For better or worse, the world has become what Marshall McLuhan called “the global village” which means, despite our many differences, that we need to foster at least a minimal sense of global citizenship among ourselves. This should not be a new idea to the communities on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The term “globalization” may have originated in the 1980s, but the mobility of goods, services, labour, technology and capital across its surface began long before written history. Ancient Egyptians, for example, embalmed their mummies with cinnamon, carried across the Indian Ocean by mariners exploiting the monsoons (8). From the great voyages of Zheng He’s Chinese treasure fleets to the arrival of Portuguese and other European adventurers that began ninety years later, the flag tended to follow trade, not the other way around. The great indigenous heritage of the Indian Ocean heritage is one of trade and the lively intermingling of cultures.

In this modern, complex and interrelated world, security has become an issue that must be treated in a holistic, inter-agency, international and multi-disciplinary manner. The desired end state of a security strategy is not to live in a warren of gated communities, but rather in a diverse neighbourhood where doors can be left unlocked and people can earn their living, raise their children and live their lives in confidence. That distant but achievable goal requires mutual cooperation which, in turn, requires mutual engagement and understanding. The professional maritime community is well placed to play a leading role in that kind of engagement since it forms what social scientists would call an "epistemic community" – a common professional fellowship that transcends national cultures. There could be no better illustration than this conference in which professionals from around the world, representing a wide range of maritime-related economic, environmental and security disciplines, have met to discuss issues of mutual interest and, in the process, become friends. May it become a model for the future.

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ENDNOTES

1. Nye, Joseph S., Jr. The Case for Deep Engagement, "Foreign Affairs" July/August 1995, p.96.
2. Griffiths, p. 292.
3. The history is described in *Every Manager's Desk Reference*, p.77, with most of the examples drawn from Gladwell, p.19.
4. Wisner et al, pp. 3-4.
5. Alexander, p. ix.
6. Ban Ki-moon speech on Thursday 1 March 2007, quoted in "The News" of Pakistan, 2 March 2007.
7. Griffiths, p. 289-290.
8. Dalby, p.36.