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Global Threat Analysis: 20 Years after the Fall of the Wall

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General Barry McCaffrey assesses the dangers that face us today – from the immediate threats posed by terrorist factions to the long-term challenges of climate change.

We should reflect on the events of 20 years ago, when totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union collapsed as a result of their inability to answer the basic needs of their people and could no longer continue to subjugate neighboring states. We should also not lose sight of the fact that authoritarianism is still alive and well and that democratic gains are easily reversed when governments lose legitimacy as a result of failure to meet the social, political, and economic aspirations of their people. In fact, non-democratic regimes pose some of the greatest contemporary global threats that must be addressed. Global security is most effectively increased by expanding democracy and creating the conditions for equitable economic prosperity in all regions of the world.

The Warsaw Pact domination of Eastern Europe and the concomitant threat to Western Europe for almost half a century teach us that unchecked militarism can overwhelm militarily and politically weak nations that do not enjoy the protection offered by strong neighbors/allies. After World War II, the Soviet Union was able to occupy by force its smaller neighbors in the absence of an effective international response, just as Germany and Japan had done in the 1930s.

The global community must be attentive today to the aspirations of would-be regional hegemon – such as Saddam Hussein’s attempt to swallow up Kuwait in 1990. Better to confront a cancer than to wait until it has metastasized. Allowing nations with hostile intent towards their neighbors to generate overwhelming military strength and to then politically corner their neighbors is a recipe for disaster. We learned that in the 1930s when Hitler was not confronted by the great democracies.

However, there are some contemporary spheres of interest – such as Russia’s ‘near abroad,’ where there are recognizable limits on the ability of distant nations to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of small states. Realism must temper idealism. Unrealistic guarantees and unsound political-military pacts can result in devastating conflict as we saw in World War I, which resulted in an estimated 16 million deaths. The consequences of being wrong today are potentially much more severe given the spread of nuclear weapons. Sober assessments of national interest must inform decisions to continue or expand existing political-military alliances or establish new ones.

The greatest threat to the global community is a major conflict that involves the use of nuclear weapons, kills dozens of millions of people, tears the fabric that binds together the global economy, and causes enormous and irreversible worldwide environmental and social harm. Experts estimate that a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan could kill 20 million within weeks and devastate both nations. Continued nuclear weapon proliferation makes such catastrophic conflict more likely.

The imminent or actual acquisition of nuclear weapons by hostile authoritarian regimes could result in preemptive strikes – such as the one conducted against the Saddam Hussein regime – to prevent or destroy a threatening nuclear capability. Unfortunately, it appears that several nations have concluded that the best defense against such attacks is to quickly acquire a demonstrable nuclear capability and delivery means. Inevitably nuclear proliferation will result in mutually destructive attacks whose consequences will not be limited to the belligerents. All nations who would suffer from such a catastrophe must act collectively to prevent it.

Terrorism is a staple of history (consider the example of the zealots of Judea who opposed Roman occupiers 2,000 years ago). Whether it is state-sponsored – practiced by government security forces to subjugate their peoples via unpredictable arrests, imprisonments, and killing (e.g. Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s, contemporary Iran, Soviet-styled communist regimes, or Nazi Germany) – or practiced by non-state entities, it must be confronted. Terrorism cannot be eliminated, but it can be contained and suppressed.

Localized terrorist organizations will generally not present threats beyond their immediate area of operations (e.g. the Baader-Meinhof Gang, FARC, IRA, Sendero Luminoso). The level of threat they pose can increase as they gain access to more destructive weapons or benefit from support from friendly organizations/regimes (e.g. Libyan provision of explosives to the IRA).

If unchecked, terrorism could be the catalyst for broader conflict, as occurred in 1914 when a single terrorist bullet precipitated World War I. There was significant concern last year that the alleged linkage of the terrorists who conducted the attack in Mumbai to organizations tolerated by the Government of Pakistan could have precipitated a devastating Indian-Pakistani conflict.

Terrorist organizations with broader agendas, such as al-Qaida, cannot be ignored. If they benefit from significant resources from sponsor states or criminal enterprise, they could gain access to weapons of mass destruction. Few countries would be able to mitigate the devastating consequences of a nuclear attack. Contemporary terrorist organizations are unconstrained by traditional considerations of morality and decency. What was historically outrageous is now commonplace. Safe havens for such organizations cannot

be tolerated. The global community must seek to understand the causes of extremism and radicalization and develop programs to counter them in order to mitigate the terrorist threat.

The breakdown or absence of the rule of law is also a significant global threat. Simply stated, bad things happen where the nation states' rule of law is weakest. What comes from the breakdown of the rule of law is genocide; drug cultivation, manufacturing, and trafficking; environmental degradation; international financial fraud; piracy; and terrorism. States where the power of central governments is weakest can become bases for non-state actors, some of which seek to act globally (e.g. al-Qaida in Afghanistan) or locally (pirates in Somalia, FARC guerrillas in Ecuador).

Countries with limited resources, weak institutions of government, and ethnic fissures are particularly vulnerable to socio-economic-political breakdown, the emergence of violent non-state actors, and penetration by transnational criminal enterprises. Coordinated international developmental assistance programs that harness both public- and private-sector resources are essential to build both the institutional capacity and the physical infrastructure required to provide good governance, build political legitimacy, and create viable and resilient nation states.

Environmental factors also clearly pose significant global threats. While the long-term consequences of climate change pose enormous future challenges, it is unlikely that global consensus can be reached in the near-term to make the collective and equitable economic sacrifices required to curtail human activities that contribute to global warming. Self interest and persistent economic inequity will prevent nations from acting in a coherent long-term strategy. Instead, it is much more likely that an economic incentive – such as an irreversible and staggering rise in oil prices – or a technological breakthrough (e.g. a drastically cheaper way of generating and storing renewable, green energy) will precipitate the societal reorganization required to live in equilibrium with our fragile environment.

In conclusion, the challenges we face are many. Reasons for pessimism are overwhelming in the near term. However, we probably should view the longer term with cautious optimism. When I was an infantry battalion commander staring down our Warsaw Pact counterparts across the Fulda Gap in the 1970s, few predicted that the Berlin Wall would fall in just ten years. No one could have anticipated that economic prosperity and democracy would flourish in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. Our task today is to identify and attain the possible, recognize and avoid the catastrophic, and avoid repeating the mistakes that have led to disaster in the past.

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