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Terrorism and Emerging Threats in the 21st Century to Established States and Governments

Monsieur Thierry de Montbrial, fellow panelists and members of this distinguished audience.

It is a privilege to be part of the Fourth Edition of the World Policy Conference. The World Policy Conference has within a short time emerged as one of the prominent international conferences dealing with global governance and related issues. I congratulate Monsieur Thierry de Montbrial on being able to bring together such a select group and combine the best of the Munich Security Conference and the World Economic Forum in Davos, aiming to develop a collective response to the challenges of our time.

Let me begin by saying that 2011 is separated from 2010 by a few months, yet it seems like a different era. The revolutionary changes during the past year in parts of the world have brought about a fundamental transformation in the climate of governance. This may appear sudden, but obviously had been in the making for some time. In the strategic realm, likewise, there are many changes taking place just below the surface of events. Given the accelerated opportunities for crosspollination of thoughts and ideas, they have similar potential to cause turbulence.

There are five aspects that I wish to touch on.

- a) Growth and spread of Extremist and Fundamentalist ideas;
- b) Asymmetric Warfare and Terrorism;
- c) Cyber issues and Cyber Warfare;
- d) Nuclear Security; and
- e) Security of the Global Commons.

It appears almost certain that the 21st Century will witness a surge in the growth and spread of fundamentalist, extremist and radical ideas. This, in turn, will spawn a host of dangerous ideologies. Armed with a powerful narrative, and aided by a corpus of educated disgruntled youth, it would become possible to spread their message across the globe, making full use of globalised communications and the Internet.

One of the critical issues for the 21st Century will, hence be, how to deal with the narrative of radicalization. It would demand a carefully thought out strategic approach, to prevent relatively minor situations from getting out of hand.

Terrorism



In the 21st Century, Terrorism is set to become a strategic instrumentality in conflicts against established States. Governments will specially need to develop policies and actions that can counter the legitimization of terrorist acts employing a single (simplistic) narrative, – that of a ‘religious ideology under attack’ or any other, which obscures the reality that terrorism’s aims are essentially political.

Allow me to outline some of the dangers that are evident already.

- States will need to effectively deal with the growing phenomenon of non-State actors. They will be the archetypal asymmetric warriors of the 21st Century, able to operate seamlessly across nations and societies; bringing with them many new skills.
- Energetic efforts will be called for, to prevent terrorists an opportunity to acquire new technologies. Already, terrorist outfits like the Al-Quaeda and the Lashkar-e-Toiba have dedicated departments for technology acquisition and technology research.
- States will also need to put in place measures that can checkmate terrorist outfits from enlarging their networking strengths. This is evident to some extent already, but the tendency will grow in this Century. Osama bin Laden’s ‘Revolutionary Philanthropy’ by which terrorist outfits were assisted with arms, material and logistics, has led to the emergence of many more international terrorist groups. The LeT based in Pakistan, operates in over 21 countries, and is connected to terrorist groups, similarly situated, such as the Al-Queda in the Maghreb, the Al-Shabab in Africa, the Tehreek-e-Taliban in Pakistan, the Harquat-ul-Jehadi Islami, and the Jamat-e-Islamiah in South East Asia, etc. This has enlarged the vitality of each of these outfits.
- States must ensure that the frightening possibility of a possible descent into catastrophic terrorism is avoided, by denying terrorists access to Nuclear, Chemical and Biological weapons. A manifest effort is already on by some terrorist groups to secure nuclear fissile material and recruit physicists and engineers, so as to be able to build a crude nuclear weapon.

The prevalent patterns of terrorism in South Asia have a message and resonance elsewhere as well. The LeT, the main perpetrator of terrorist attacks in India, has a reach well beyond South Asia. Also, the universally condemned terrorist attack on multiple targets in Mumbai on November 26, 2008 (in which over 170 people were killed) revealed the great advances made by terrorist organizations in recent years. The support they can also expect from organizations such as the ISI in Pakistan further enhances their capabilities.

Many acts of terrorism today are being carried out by small de-centralised terrorist modules, but linked to known terrorist organizations outside the country. The new imperative is multi-targeting to maximize the impact of a terrorist attack. Quite a few jihadists are homegrown, who are able to easily merge with local communities. They are often radicalized by local rabid preachers, and later sent for training to schools on the Afghan-Pakistan border, Yemen and other places.

Terrorism is, hence, becoming a hydra-headed monster in more senses than one. Any slackening of the Global War on Terrorism would, thus, be a grievous mistake.

Cyber Security

The Cyber Threat has been discussed previously, but permit me to provide a security perspective to that debate.

The Cyber threat is well on course to provide a significant challenge to nations in the 21st Century. As the world becomes more wired, opportunities for disruption through cyber attacks will not merely increase but security concerns will rise further. Anonymity provided by cyber operations makes it an ideal weapon for the enemy.



Employing high performance computers and computer software, as also complex engineering systems, it is already possible to totally cripple a country's digital information and dissemination mechanism, and disrupt its connectivity systems, employing Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS), Mass Cyber Inundation Techniques, and Social Malware of various kinds. Already a dozen known instances of a shut down have occurred. With growing convergence and integration of computing, communication, storage and sensing, together with more evolved hacking techniques – than the current Reverse Engineering, Wetware and Tunnels – Cyber warriors are bound to have a field day. Already, across the world, hacker gangs are trading tools and techniques.

Nuclear Security

Nuclear security will continue to remain a serious challenge for nations in the 21st Century. Initiatives such as Global Zero, and increasing pressures for nuclear disarmament reflect the degree of concern that exists on this score.

Nuclear security demands delegitimization of nuclear weapons; reducing existing nuclear weapons stockpiles; de-alerting nuclear weapons – to prevent unintentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons; securing all vulnerable material and improving security and accountability of nuclear material. No such massive effort is in the offing. Even if such an attempt were to be made, the outcome is uncertain.

Clandestine proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction will, hence, pose a grave threat. Existing regulatory frameworks that take care of security and related matters are highly inadequate. There is also no proper audit of effective locks, secure storage facilities and other custodial issues. Without further tightening of such measures, nuclear security will remain a chimera.

Three related threat scenarios involving nuclear material exist.

One is of terrorist or rogue outfits being able to develop a capability for nuclear terrorism. Research is being conducted by certain terrorist groups towards this end.

Another is that Terrorists would employ a cyber weapon to shutdown essential functions of a nuclear reactor such as the power supply, thus disrupting the flow of coolants, leading to a meltdown in the nuclear reactor *a la* Fukushima. This would lead to large releases of radioactive gases.

A third possibility is of a direct terrorist attack on a nuclear reactor core.

Prospects may appear remote at present, but can hardly be ignored given the rate of technological advancement.

Security of the Global Commons

Ensuring the security of the 'Global Commons' will become a major issue in the 21st Century.

Oceans are likely to become the new conflict zones. There are several unresolved issues such as: maritime boundaries, the territorial limits of Extended/Exclusive Economic Zones (which contain untold maritime wealth), contentious Sovereignty issues, etc which would result in increased conflicts between nations.

Additionally, piracy, terrorism on the high seas, and criminal activities using the Sea Lanes such as trafficking in arms, humans and contraband material, will become an even more serious problem for nations. The trend will test the capability of most nations.



Outer Space

In spite of pious statements to preserve Outer Space for peaceful purposes, there is enough evidence to indicate that nations are preparing to make Outer Space the next battlefield. A few countries already possess advanced systems to shoot down satellites at higher and lower altitudes. By the middle of the 21st Century, it is expected that at least a dozen states will be in a position to deploy weapons in space. This will complicate the case for preservation of Outer Space for peaceful purposes.

Mass Migration

One of the most serious challenges the world will confront in the 21st Century will be mass migration of populations across nations and continents. This could be triggered by one of several factors – food security, famine conditions, pandemics, ethnic violence, natural disasters, economic factors, and issues connected with Climate Change. The spectre of millions of migrants moving from one country to another within the same Continent, or between Continents could well haunt many nations in the 21st Century.

Conclusion

Emerging threats and challenges in the 21st Century are likely to test the flexibility, ingenuity and ability of governments worldwide. Risk is an unbidden guest in strategic security affairs. The element of risk is bound to increase as the Century progresses. As was evident in the case of the 'Arab Spring', governments display a weakness when it comes to prediction and anticipation of events and analysis of risks. States need to build adequate capacity for such eventualities to be able to deal with the likely upheavals in the 21st Century.

The world will also need to build new structures to cope with the emerging dimensions of security in the 21st Century. This should include a capacity to deal with non-State actors. Also, it must be understood that no nation can today hope to protect its interests entirely on its own. This will call for closer cooperation and wider participation among countries and across Continents.