Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, Winter 2006/07, Vol. 9, Issue 2.

# THINKING ABOUT STRATEGIC THREATS[1]

***Peter Archambault, Directorate of Defence Analysis, Department of National Defence***

I'm going to talk today about how to look at the security environment from a North American perspective in order to think about strategic threats. I'm not here to talk about operational or tactical threats, how to respond to them or even how to prevent them. I am here to talk about how to frame the problem for policy-makers. My contention is that threats to North America have to be understood in the broad context of American pre-eminence in the international system today and the foreseeable future. Before thinking about direct threats to the continent, therefore, we must think about how US power might be threatened and by whom.[2]

This is not always the way we think about threats. Discussions of threats and, more generally, studies of the security environment tend to start with a list, and it usually looks something like this:

- Terrorism
- A breakdown of authority in certain states (i.e., failed and failing states, e.g., Haiti, Afghanistan etc)
- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles
- Regional tensions
- Population increases (urbanization)
- Spread of infectious diseases

---

[1] The author is currently employed at National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa. The views expressed in this paper are his own and not necessarily those of the Government of Canada, Department of National Defence or the Canadian Forces.

[2] I am grateful to my colleagues, Dr. Michael Roi, Dr. Charles Morrisey and Major Donald Neill for helping to shape my thoughts on developing tradecraft for strategic analysis.

©Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, 2007.

- Resource scarcity
- Climate change
- Natural disasters.

Lists describing the security environment produced after 9/11 tend to have additional detail to focus the discussion of the terrorist threat, but little more than vague allusions to Al Qaeda or like minded groups.[3] We then usually get more lists derived from these "master lists," and discussions deteriorate into academic questions about whether the Westphalian system of states is collapsing, or whether globalization is changing everything or whether national power means anything anymore. As interesting as these discussions might be, they do not help decision-makers deal with the real world threats to national interests.

For the most part these "lists" have changed little since the end of the Cold War, and it is likely we'll keep seeing them. And why not? Who can credibly deny that any of them are threats to someone, somewhere, sometime? Forecasting has become a cottage industry for those that are unsure of how to understand the present, and vague "lists" can support even vaguer notions of a future that may or may not come to pass.

However, these lists can mislead policy-makers, because they are a hodge-podge of *beliefs* and *tactics* (terrorism); *capabilities* (WMDs and ballistic missiles); *interpretation of political conditions* (failed states, or the current descriptor, fragile states); and *broad trends* (demographics, disease and resource scarcity). These types of lists also fail to distinguish between man-made "threats" and Mother Nature "threats."

[3] See, for example, A Secure Europe for a Better World: European Security Strategy (European Union Institute foe Security Studies, December 2003), p. 7.

They also fail to answer the question that should start any threat assessment: Who is threatening whom? People threaten people; states threaten states. The means they choose to do so is just that – a way of carrying out the threat.

My point here is that lists are just lists unless we impose some discipline on how we order them, and why. For us to make any sense of these lists, in other words, we have to think about two things: What is the purpose of making the list in the first place and what we as analysts can do to help policy-makers distinguish between "threats" and "challenges?"; and how far into the future we can actually identify "threats" and "challenges" with such certainty that plans can be developed to counter them?

After all, strategic analysis has to be done with a purpose in mind. Looking at the world is not "strategic" unless done from the point of view of understanding the world not just for the sake of it but rather to protect and advance one's interests. To do so means thinking about the security environment in terms of "drivers" and "conditions." The former consists of actors that shape the strategic environment; the latter is the environment: They are not the same.

Our point of view at this conference is the North American continent. We are, necessarily, thinking of the continent as a strategic entity.[4] This is not to say that the two countries have no disputes or differences. Even with NAFTA, there are trade disputes like softwood lumber, just as there are differences in self-perception and strategic culture. There is also the question of divergent views over Arctic sovereignty that likely will become more apparent in the future.

---

[4] The recent report "Building a North American Community," Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations with the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and the Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales, is an attempt to deal with North America as a strategic entity with shared threats. (Report downloaded 2 April 2006). http://www.cfr.org/publication/8102/

But these problems are for another day. I am concerned here with the common interest of Canada and the United States in the security and shared responsibility of the defence of the continent.

So how do we think about threats to North America? We could make a list. We could synthesize events in as many regions and flash-points as possible, in an effort to provide a comprehensive review of global affairs. We could try to gauge the impact of US preponderance; we could identify intractable strategic impasses and a host of security-related issues that might affect Canadian and American interests.

But such lists already exist.

Rather, let's look at how the world has changed since 9/11 and why. We do so because 9/11 put to rest any notion that either country is prepared to wait for threats to materialize before acting on them. Bush's view that the 9/11 attacks were not just criminal but an act of war meant early on that operations enduring freedom and Iraqi freedom have since become "part of the homeland defense mission."[5] Canada also links security at home with security abroad, and Ottawa is engaged in Afghanistan for national interests.[6]

The United States is now a revolutionary power. It is so because the Bush administration wants to change the international status quo, whereas prior to 9/11 it followed the path of previous administrations and tried to manage the international status quo.

---

[5] Jim Garamone, American Forces Press Service, "Pentagon's Homeland Defense Effort Moves into High Gear," 13 October 2003. www.defendAmerica.mil.

[6] For an overview of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, see http://www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca/mission-en.asp

From a continental perspective, therefore, the strategic reality that primarily concerns us is that American power is our center of gravity. It is that power that allows Washington to take on the challenge of shaking up the status quo in order to re-shape the security environment.

How does the Canadian analyst deal with this post-9/11 world? Most importantly, we must concern ourselves with the objectives and strategy of the United States. Analysts concerned with broad strategic matters that affect continental defence and security must, therefore, have in mind two questions at all times: first, who will oppose the US and why; and second, can they gather the capabilities of a "peer competitor" to the US sufficient to restrict US actions? We ask these questions because we know that the United States is no longer interested in leaving the world the way it is.

We are used to the international security environment "the way it is'" and analysts are used to dealing with its traditional face on a regular basis. Long before 9/11, after all, we worked to understand the security impact of rogue states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, resource competition and regional flash-points. None of these is a new subject for analysts. It is time to recognize, though, that all events, trends and security developments in the world are not of equal strategic importance, and the analyst must view what goes on in the world today in terms of how it relates to US interests and objectives.

Strategy is, after all, not how the world looks, but rather how leaders, whatever their stripe, use the means at their disposal to change it in their favour. While we may not know how successful Washington will be in achieving its goals, we can identify who or what could stand in its way, and what risks may come to pass if the US fails.

It is important to comprehend that the US is not the only actor, and it cannot impose its will always and against anyone all the time. We know there are those that resent US influence and may be willing to oppose US actions. We also know of those who are uncomfortable with what they perceive to be US unilateralism. There are those who oppose US actions because they are not prepared to bear the cost in blood and treasure that the long war against the transnational Jihadists may require. Opponents of the US are not all “enemies”, but some are. Both enemies and allies, nevertheless, can affect the success or failure of US objectives.

We are concerned, then, not with “conditions” of the security environment but the actors therein. After all, is it not obvious to even the most casual observer that the death and destruction of 9/11 was not akin to that wrought by an unpredictable act of nature? Indeed, most analysts of the international security environment will agree intuitively that it has changed since 9/11.

That said, those same analysts would be hard pressed to find agreement on the nature and degree of change. While some might argue that 9/11 was a ground-breaking event for those who would wage the war on terror, others might argue that 9/11 was rather the high point of Al Qaeda’s war against the west and downplay the importance of the attack in the ebb and flow of international security affairs.

It was, simply, a wake-up call for the west that it was being targeted by an identifiable, real enemy that saw itself in a long-term war against the west and apostate Muslim regimes alike, to be pursued as a religious obligation not to be deterred or subject to negotiation.

Former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, R. James Woolsey, has provided a description of the enemy in this war, which he argues is comprised of at least three movements emanating from the Middle East that were “at war with us for years.” They are, in the main, Shi’ite clerics that rule Iran, the Wahhabi fundamentalist movement centered in Saudi Arabia and, although nominally secular, the “fascist” Ba’athist parties of Iraq and Syria. It is possible to identify their “ war on America” to have started with the taking of hostages by Iranian revolutionaries in 1979, continued by the attack on the US embassy and marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and stepped up by the string of terrorist strikes executed by al Qaeda and the struggle to contain Saddam Hussein since the first Gulf War.[7]

And let’s not forget Osama bin Laden’s declaration of war on America in February 1998, making it a religious obligation to attack Americans and their allies whenever and wherever possible.[8]

Given that broad outlines of this emergent threat had appeared long before 9/11, it could be argued that it has been the response to 9/11 by the United States and its allies, rather than the attacks themselves, that has caused change in the security environment. The Bush administration, and its Anglosphere partners in London and Canberra, have seized upon the war on terror as a war of ideas, only to be won when the ideology of terror gives way to the stabilizing condition of freedom.

Consider, for instance, the effects of the war on terror on the Middle East and beyond: US and coalition forces have invaded two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq,

---

[7] This paragraph is part of a longer study that deals with how to frame the war on terror. See Peter M. Archambault and Charles C. Morrisey, “A Necessary Victory: Afghanistan, Iraq and the War on Terrorism,” Directorate of Strategic Analysis Research Note 2003/05 (Policy Planning Division, Department of National Defence, December 2003)

[8] A translation of this, bin Laden’s second Fatwa, can be found at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1998.html

forced their despotic regimes out of power and have created the conditions for their people to write new constitutions and vote in elections for new leaders. As part of its vision of a free and democratic Middle East, the Bush administration seems quite comfortable with the notion of shaking up the region to change the status quo. It is at least arguable that this has, in fact, happened in Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian territories. The last Israeli settlers have left Gaza, creating the conditions for co-existing Palestinian and Israeli states.

It is impossible to know how any of these developments will turn out. Needless to say, from an analytical point of view, it is sufficient to recognize that an activist United States has created the conditions for a shakeup of the old order. Still, the United States is not the only actor in the region, and, preponderant or not, it should not be assumed that it can impose its will there or anywhere else in the world.

For instance, even if popular discontent can be harnessed to overthrow authoritarian regimes, there is no guarantee that the resulting arrangement will be any more democratic than the old one. Still, the war on terror is fundamentally a war of ideas, and one in which the Bush administration faces the challenge of transforming authoritarian regimes to democracies in order to pre-empt (or deter) the cultivation of terror and the states that harbour or sponsor terror. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq both were undertaken as part of that strategy. Again, though, in the long run, that does not mean either country will be a successful democracy integrated as responsible partners within the international system. It is impossible to know.

So while the Bush administration pursues an ambitious and, I hasten to add, longer-term agenda that looks to shake-up regimes and deny terrorists their supporters,

there is also the matter of containing states that pose potential threats to the US, its allies and their interests. As Robert Kaplan has pointed out recently, "the traditional state remains the most dangerous force on the international scene. Perhaps the greatest security threat we face today is from a paranoid and resentful state leader, armed with biological or nuclear weapons and willing to make strategic use of stateless terrorists."[9]

Just as it is impossible to know how policies in the Middle East will turn out, it is also impossible to know how the Bush administration's broader counter-proliferation strategy, aimed at denying the coalescence of terrorism and WMD, will play out. As Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld reminded us on the question of WMDs in Iraq,

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.[10]

While grappling with something as vague as an "unknown unknown" is disconcerting, we do know that there is no room for error in the WMD game. Nobody wants to be in the position of responding to a WMD attack or managing its consequences. Deterrence, pre-emption and prevention are the only means to avoid this. In this high-stakes security environment, the implication of Rumsfeld's

---

[9] Robert A. Kaplan, "Old States, New Threats," *Washington Post*, 23 April 2006 (Downloaded 26 April, 2006) http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/04/21/AR2006042101772_pf.html

[10] DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, 12 February 2002, http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t02122002_t212sdv2.html (downloaded 12 April 2006).

epistemological angst is that we have to frame potential threats by measuring both the capability and intent of potential adversaries, and how they might take advantage of our vulnerabilities.

That is a challenge. Cynthia Grabo, in her recently declassified study of the relationship between warning and intelligence analysis (anticipating surprise: analysis for strategic warning), discusses how difficult it is for intelligence analysts to integrate analysis of capability and intent. To those who argue that analysts should concentrate on the former at the expense of the latter, she suggests they put themselves in the position of the German high command in the spring of 1944 as it looked across the channel at the enormous build-up of allied combat power in the United Kingdom. She asks, "would their assessment have been, 'yes, there is a tremendous capability here, but can we really judge their intent? Perhaps this is only a bluff and they will launch the real invasion through southern France, or perhaps they have not made up their minds what they will do.'"

Consider briefly the problem of WMD proliferation using Grabo's framework. Let there be no doubt that on any list of threats, nuclear terrorism is the most horrifying. Graham Allison argues that,

> Given the number of actors with serious intent, the accessibility of weapons or nuclear materials from which elementary weapons could be constructed, and the almost limitless ways in which terrorists could smuggle a weapon through American borders… on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade is more likely than not.[11]

---

[11] Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2005)

While we have a pretty good idea about the intentions of terrorist groups, there is less certainty when it comes to their capability to deliver a nuclear weapon. We do know, however, that terrorists cannot build nuclear weapons without fissile materials – plutonium or highly enriched uranium – from a state source. What can we do about that? Can we deter possible state sponsors by promising retaliation if we can somehow identify the origins of nuclear material after an attack?[12] In other words, the intent and capability of terrorist groups or "non-state actors" may be difficult if not impossible to assess, but we do know that they require "state-based actors" to provide capability, at least in the case of fissile material.

Furthermore, how do think about "state-based threats" to North America, its allies and its interests? North Korea and Iran are cases-in-point. Because we think we know their intentions, is it not safe to assume that the simple possession of WMDs by 'rogue states' presupposes their use? From a North American perspective, this is a concern both for continental defence and for the defence of allies abroad.

So we have to think about states of concern, such as Iran and North Korea, not just in terms of how they might threaten North America with a nuclear weapon (The Central Intelligence Agency assesses that the Taepo Dong-2 missile could reach the United States with a nuclear weapon size payload)[13] but how regional balances of power could be affected. How would a nuclear capable North Korea affect Japan? South Korea? These are US strategic interests that will not go away.

---

[12] Michael A. Levi, "Deterring Nuclear Terrorism," In *Issues in Science and Technology*, Spring 2004.

[13] Statement of the Honorable Porter J. Goss, Director of Central Intelligence "Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States" (Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, 16 February 2005) http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate

Similarly, how would we react to a nuclear-armed Iran (whose president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made comments about wiping Israel "off the map")?[14] Does this sort of statement tell us all we need to know about intentions, or do they become less clear if we look further into decision-making in Tehran and find that all in positions of power might not share Ahmadinejad's thinking?[15] Are we even confident in our thinking about deterrence and how it functioned during the Cold War? Can we then apply this understanding to the emerging relationship between established nuclear weapons states and new nuclear powers, whose regimes may not be as reasonable as one would hope.[16]

The Bush administration's approach to countering WMD proliferation is pragmatic and flexible in the sense of how it adapts traditional instruments to today's proliferation challenges.[17] The Bush administration adopted traditional multilateral approaches to containing the ambitions of both countries to acquire WMD capabilities. The six-party talks have been the framework for managing North Korea, while the European Union's "big three" took the lead on Iran.

However, the United States has taken the decision to engage India in a pragmatic way on the development of civilian nuclear energy programs despite the fact that it is not a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty.

Washington has treated India differently than other states because, quite simply, India is not seen as a threat. The results-oriented proliferation security initiative met with

---

[14] David B. Rivkin Jr. and Lee A. Casey, "A Legal Case Against Iran" (*Washington Post*) http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/05/AR2006060501283.html
[15] Pollack, Kenneth, Ray Takeyh "Taking on Tehran," *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr2005, Vol. 84, Issue 2, pp. 20-34.
[16] I am grateful to Dr. Michael Roi for providing his thoughts on deterrence.
[17] D. A. Neill, "Counter Proliferation in the Second Bush Administration," in *Strategic Assessment 2005*, Department of National Defence/Directorate of Strategic Analysis/Policy Planning Division Policy Group, November 2005, pp. 72-77.

some early success, but it is impossible to know if weapons of mass destruction will stay out of the wrong hands. There are those states and non-state groups, after all, that will try to find ways around non-proliferation regimes in order to acquire the capabilities they see as their due. This is where we have to be most worried about the marrying-up of state and non-state actors in attacking western interests.

Now let's look at the issue I raised earlier: that it is not only enemies who may deny the US success in reaching its objectives in countering the WMD/terrorism/rogue state nexus.

If US power is the center-of gravity for North American interests and security (and if one regards the perpetuation of US predominance as beneficial to Canadian interests), then we can also say that any action opposing US power is a threat to that center-of gravity. Should we consider Gaullist attempts to establish opposing "poles" of power to balance the US to be a threat?

And how do we view China? We could say it's a threat. We could cite the missiles pointed at Taiwan or potential strategic competition with the US in general (especially on the energy side) as threatening to the US and US interests. Or, we could take the opposite view and suggest that China's peaceful rise will be guaranteed by increasingly integrating it into the international system. Put simply, why would it threaten a world that provides prosperity?

It is now becoming a mantra that there are rising powers in the world that will displace the US, such as China the European Union, India or Brazil. It used to be Japan that would displace the US. Then it was Germany. Upon re-unification, it was going to be the new powerhouse. However, there is no peer competitor now or in the

foreseeable future. But that does not mean that other powers have no ability to counter the US.

For the US is vulnerable because it can be denied the perception of legitimacy. Anti-Americanism and resentment of US power can have tremendous effect. As analysts it is important for us to understand the impact of rising anti-Americanism -- I'm certainly not convinced that it is a good thing and may prove to be extremely counter-productive if the US decides to retrench and step back from an active role in the world. We must remember that few states – and certainly not the European ones – have the wherewithal to intervene to maintain global stability. At the very least, we have to give clear-headed as opposed to emotional thought to the benefits and problems of predominant American power. This is not a new dilemma. Rather it is one that Canadians have faced before. Let me repeat how important it is to look at the world as it is and not as we may like it to be.

**Conclusion**

So what is the challenge for those concerned with what might threaten North America's strategic center of gravity? It is to recognize that strategic analysis is not concerned with what we all know and what we are used to. And it is certainly not concerned with how we would like the world to be. Rather, it is concerned with who wants to change the way things are, how they want to do it, whether they will succeed and what it will mean to the broader security environment. In the past, we would have analyzed Napoleon's objectives and capabilities during his wars; Britain's artful diplomacy and punishing seapower during most of the nineteenth century; the Kaiser

and Adolf Hitler as they harnessed German power during the period of the world wars; and the struggle played out during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union as they tried to expand their spheres of power and influence without fighting each other directly. From a North American perspective, it is now time to adapt our analysis to how today's revolutionary power – the United States - is changing the world, who opposes that change and how their intent and capability could take advantage of vulnerabilities.[18]

[18] The question of how to direct and organize strategic analysis in the post-9/11 world was raised in *Strategic Assessment 2005*. See Peter Archambault and Charles Morrisey, "The Analyst's Challenge," p. 96. http://www.forces.gc.ca/admpol/eng/doc/str_e.htm