Ten Years After the Terrorist Attacks of 9/11: The Need for a Transnational Approach to Address Risks to US Global Security Interests

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INTRODUCTION

Increasing risks associated with man-made and naturally occurring incidents, coupled with the inter-relationship of seemingly disparate activities, suggest that the world is more dangerous and vulnerable than at anytime in recent history. The United States, as the most technologically advanced and globally connected nation on earth, is especially at risk to systematic or single-incident disruptions. Lessons learned from incidents occurring prior to and since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have demonstrated that the current US approach to addressing risk is not always effective and may be ill suited to assess emerging challenges. The US no longer has the geographic or economic luxury of approaching security issues from a domestic or international perspective. Regardless of where a threat emanates from, today's security professionals need to recognize, respond to, and appreciate the totality of the near- and long-term implications of risks facing the nation. During this period of remembrance of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, now is the time to consider transitioning away from a geographic-centric focus of safeguarding the nation's interests to a transnational approach to security that reflects a better understanding of the complexities of global risks.

UNITED STATES APPROACH TO SECURITY PRIOR TO SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Many changes to the US approach to addressing global security issues have occurred since World War I and have usually been in response to an incident that has demonstrated a shortcoming in the government's ability to effectively detect and respond to a threat. Based in part on the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the deficiencies observed in effectively addressing international security matters during World War II in 1947, the National Security Act was passed to better align the missions and goals of the military, foreign policy, and intelligence communities. The surprises associated with the start of the Korean War in 1950, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the bombing of the Oklahoma City Murrah Federal building in 1995, led to agency reorganizations and redistribution of resources between the international and domestic security activities. Similarly, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has been reorganized numerous times after perceived failures in responding to natural disasters.

After each of these incidents, and others like them, successive administrations and policymakers pursued organizational changes to the nation's security apparatus, including a reprioritizing of focus and resources previously dedicated to overseas and domestic security activities. Often the philosophical and organizational changes approved by policymakers assumed that the next significant event would likely take the form of the most recent incident. In fact, some might suggest that many of America's security leaders continue to suffer from the same myopic approach to assessing current and emerging threats. The World Economic Forum's annual global risk report for 2011 found that "in an increasingly turbulent global environment there is the temptation to always focus on the most recent risk event, it is important to take a long-term perspective to risk assessment and response. Many global risks could emerge over decades rather than months or years."[1] Such a propensity to philosophically approach and organize to fight the last war may have contributed to the US government's under appreciation of risks facing the nation prior to 9/11. Al-Qaeda first

targeted US interests when attempting to attack service members in Yemen in 1992. In the intervening period, between 1992 and September 10, 2001, the terrorist group successfully carried out numerous other attacks against US global interests. Distracted by more recent events and lacking appreciation of global threats, the nation's security attention was focused elsewhere.

Post-9/11 Security: A Sometimes Effective But Not Reflective Approach to Threats

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US reorganized its security apparatus, creating a host of new organizations and authorities to better address threats directed at the homeland. This reaction, and the subsequent Global War on Terror, came at high cost both in terms of blood and treasure and were undertaken during a very emotional and highly politicized environment. One might describe the post-9/11 approach to security as the taking of offensive actions overseas to defeat terrorists planning efforts directed at global interests while undertaking defensive measures in the homeland making it difficult for bad actors to enter or freely operate in the United States. The US military, foreign service, and the overseas-focused aspects of the intelligence community have been focused on the away game while the post-9/11 creation, the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, state, local, tribal, and private sector entities have been guarding the homeland. To some, such a concept could be viewed as a rational response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In hindsight, it could also be argued that while the attacks were significant and catastrophic, they were not indicative of a persistent threat challenging the American way of life. Furthermore, some might suggest that the US response to this tragedy has contributed to a misunderstanding of the diversity of threats found in the global environment and the creation of a sometimes-ineffective approach to assessing risk.

The post-9/11 government adoption of a bifurcated organizational and philosophical approach to national and homeland security has achieved a number of well-publicized and unreported counterterrorism, intelligence, natural disaster, and public health successes. However, there have also been examples where the unclear responsibilities of applicable organizations and the need to address prospective threats from a domestic or international perspective have led to inefficiencies, actual and near tragedy, and continuing challenges in detecting, responding, or recovering from a security-related issue. Examples include:

- Response and recovery efforts and offers of international assistance associated with Hurricane Katrina of 2005 and the 2010 B.P. oil spill,

- Intelligence community and diplomatic policy failures that nearly led to a successful detonation of an explosive device onboard a US bound aircraft in December 2009,

- Late recognition of radicalization efforts by global actors enticing US citizens to take-up arms against countrymen,

- Slow recognition and response to the 2009 global H1N1 pandemic, and

- Numerous counterterrorism-related legal and policy decisions void of appreciation of long-term implications and consequences.

For most of these incidences failures were assessed, additional resources were authorized, reorganizations implemented, and new policies were developed to ensure that the next time a similar incident occurs a more robust system would be in place to detect prospective anomalies. However, the conceptual approach to detecting and responding to threats remains the same: maintaining separate, and at times uncoordinated processes, based on the current understanding of the origination of the threat and the prospective targets. Future threats directed at US interests are increasingly less likely to observe and be constrained by national borders or the veil of geographic protection enjoyed since World War II. DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano offered a similar sentiment in June 2011 at a Center for Strategic and International Studies forum focused on building strong international partnerships, when she stated

that "the evolving threats we face are not limited by international borders."[2] Natural disasters have never recognized a nation's borders when causing damage and America's introduction to asymmetric warfare against US interests should serve as an indicator that some of America's greatest attributes; open society, multitude of connections to global activities, and observance of the rule of law, also serve to make us more vulnerable.

Due to the complexity of current and emerging threats and US interconnectedness with global financial, infrastructure, and security ecosystems, the nation is increasingly at risk of falling prey to man-made or naturally occurring incidences. Failed and failing states and ungoverned areas; sophisticated criminal syndicates; changes to the climate; the ease of manufacturing and surreptitious delivery of harmful explosive, biological, and technological devices with increasingly lethal results; and dwindling life-sustaining resources are but a few of the near- and long-term transnational security challenges the nation will be required to confront. Accompanying these threats will be a degraded international order whereby many nations' capacity to address challenges and organizations focused on global sustainability may be on the decline. Traditionally stable state powers the United States relies upon to identify risks and assist with addressing global security issues of mutual interest are encountering challenges in maintaining viability. An assessment accompanying the annually published Failed State Index, published in June 2011 by the Fund for Peace, notes "the upper echelons of the Failed States Index are occupied almost exclusively by Western European nations. Some of the worst slides this year were recorded in Western Europe as the economic crisis began to impact on countries such as Ireland and Greece."[3] Should other long-standing international partners of the US encounter economic difficulties, one must start questioning their capacity to be an effective member of the global security apparatus.

What might have been understood, but not adequately acted upon until after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011, was that a threat to US interests can be manifested from anywhere in the world and have both domestic and international implications. Such threats can have very real safety, economic, and societal consequences if security leaders are unable to appreciate the transnational implications accompanying risks found throughout the world. In a speech given to the South Carolina Corps of Cadets in October, 2010 DHS Secretary Napolitano addressed the need for today's security professionals to take a more global perspective of risks facing the nation when she stated that none of today's threats "stop at the border to morph from a national to a homeland security threat. Our thinking – and our responses – can't stop at the borders either." She further stated:

> The attacks of September 11, 2001 challenge the conventional notion that foreign threats were truly foreign and that we could maintain a divide between domestic and foreign affairs. Profound shifts are still underway and are even faster and more transformational that ever. The lines between the foreign and domestic are even murkier than before, if often not there at all.[4]

The nation can no longer afford to categorize or approach threats from a national or homeland security perspective. Strategies, policies, organizations, and resources devoted to addressing one aspect of risk to US global security interests will prove insufficient to the challenges facing the nation and may miss significant connections to the larger global threat environment. In order to best prepare the nation's security professionals to address emerging risks, a transnational approach should be adopted.

A TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH TO PROTECTING US GLOBAL SECURITY INTERESTS

Whether a threat emanates from overseas or in the homeland, implications can be found, and should be explored, to gain a true appreciation of specific activity and possible consequences. A transnational security approach, which entails understanding and addressing the interrelationship of global risks to a nation's short- and long-term strategic interests, should be adopted to assist in recognizing and responding to

threats we know exist, threats we can envision, and unforeseen threats. The adoption of a transnational approach to protecting US global security interests would have a number of benefits, including:

- Giving current and future security professionals an opportunity to better appreciate the diversity and complexity of threats facing the nation,

- Providing policymakers a better understanding of the implications and consequences of actions pursued in response to an emerging threat,

- Utilizing funds and other resources in a more efficient and targeted manner, and

- Reducing the likelihood of unforeseen events and a more thoughtful approach to policy and resource considerations when a significant incident does occur.

The 2008 *National Intelligence Council's Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* report affirmed the need for security professionals to have a transnational appreciation of risk by assessing that the future will entail a "rapidly changing international order of growing geopolitical challenges with an increased likelihood of discontinuities, shocks, and surprises."[5] The Global Trends report further noted that today's enemies have already adopted a global approach to terrorism, crime, and financial pursuits with the goal of "leveraging transnational outcomes across national and organizational boundaries."

The US *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, released in June 2011, states "the preeminent security threat to the United States continues to be from al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents."[6] According to data compiled by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, for the majority of the period between 1975 to 2010 there has been a steady trend upward of the number of people affected, and estimated damages caused, by natural disasters.[7] The 2011 Global Peace Index has found that the world is less peaceful for a third straight year based on assessing international, regional and national conflicts, safety and security in societies, and militarization efforts.[8]

As witnessed during the past decade, policy, organizational, and resource decisions made in a post-incident crisis environment often lack foresight and are dismissive of long-term consequences of actions pursued. Whether al-Qaeda will still be in existence when America observes the twenty-year remembrance of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the consequences of disasters continue to increase, or the world becomes a less peaceful place, a reasonable assessment of tomorrow's challenges suggests a new approach is needed to understand and address global risk. Elected officials and policymakers should use ongoing budgetary discussions related to reducing or eliminating funding for activities and programs that are seen as ineffective or duplicative to initiate changes to the nation's current approach to security. Through the use of future budget allocations, policy-makers should require systemic changes be made to the federal security apparatus that transitions security organizations away from focusing on threats from a geographically linear perspective to an appreciation of the global complexities associated with risks facing the nation. Future legislative, strategy, policy, and resource decisions should be based on a more mature understanding of the global risk environment with a desire for the federal government to be organized and resourced in a manner that corresponds to current and emerging transnational security concerns. Adoption of such an approach will better prepare the nation to address known threats and unforeseen risks.

As we enter a relatively peaceful period of remembrance with the tenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, America now possesses a refined understanding of risks to the nation's global interests. Might this period of reflection serve as an opportune time to discuss adopting a transnational approach to meeting tomorrow's security challenges?

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[1] World Economic Forum, *Global Risks 2011* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum, 2011), 41.

[2] DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, remarks before Center for Strategic and International Studies Statesmen's Forum, *Building Strong International Security Partnerships: The U.S.-India Homeland Security Dialogue*, Washington, DC, June 2, 2011, http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr_1307485712555.shtm.

[3] J.J. Messner, senior associate at the Fund for Peace, "Remarks on Index Highlights of The Failed State Index 2011," Washington, DC, June 29, 2011, http://www.fundforpeace.org/global/?q=node/143.

[4] DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, remarks before the Citadel's Corps of Cadets, *Greater Issues: Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano*, Charleston, SC, October 21, 2010, http://externalaffairs.citadel.edu/napolitano_speech.

[5] National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington DC: National Intelligence Council, November 2008), 3.

[6] President Barak Obama, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, June 28, 2011, 3, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

[7] United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, *Disaster Through a Different Lens: Behind Every Effect, There is a Cause*, (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, n.d.) 28.

[8] Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index* (Sydney, Australia: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2011), 3.