

## The Revolution in Terrorist Affairs

By Major D.D. Eustace

In all of the discussions about the erosion of American leadership, it needs to be repeated again and again that the decline referred to is relative not absolute, and is therefore perfectly natural; and that

the only serious threat to the real interests of the United States can come from a failure to adjust sensibly to the newer world order.

Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 1988

But I would be unfaithful to my experience if I thought we had a general solution to these problems. *We are not in control*. As societies grow more populous and complex, the idea that a global elite like the UN can engineer reality from above is just as absurd as the idea that political "scientists" can reduce any of this to a *science*.

Robert Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 1996

*A couple more bursts and they're goin' right through*, he thought.

Tom Clancy, *Games of State*, 1996

No discussion of terrorism can now be considered complete without reference to September 11, 2001, so here it is: get used to it. In his essay "Terrorism as a Strategy of Struggle: Past and Future," Ariel Merari contends that due to the fundamental nature of terrorism as a mode of 'struggle' the nature of terrorism itself cannot fundamentally change. This paper will argue that the nature of terrorism *has* changed, indeed, that there is an ongoing revolution in terrorist affairs. This revolution incorporates four trends that, in sum, have fundamentally shifted the nature of terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for the foreseeable future.

The four trends include a shift in the nature of effects desired by terrorists from indirect to direct; a negation by terrorist groups of traditional international dispute resolution mechanisms; incorporation by terrorists of the methods and techniques of the revolution in military affairs, and finally, as alluded to by Paul Kennedy, the surfacing of tectonic shifts in the broader historical picture which will impact the West's ability to adjust to this new state of international affairs.

In the 'pre-revolutionary' terrorist paradigm, the emphasis was on indirect effects. To the extent that Merari's description of terrorism as political struggle was correct, such struggles sought to use violence in order to trigger a response from an intra or international organization, usually a government. The aim was to ensure that the particular injustice or grievance in question would be placed on the national or international agenda. Left-wing terrorist organizations were particularly adept at espousing this *David* versus *Goliath* philosophy in order to justify their actions. Typically, the tactics chosen reflected the political nature of their acts: assassinations, kidnapping of government officials, bombing of government offices or military targets all with a view to altering the current status or power relationships within a given society. Targets were usually discriminatory and following the action terrorists would typically issue clear unequivocal messages of responsibility through the media.

Such 'industrial age' terrorism was also reflected in the terrorist organizations themselves: hierarchical and militarily structured. Groups were lead by older long-serving members of the 'struggle' who had personal experience and knowledge of the conditions which lead to the need for terrorist action (at least in their minds). The emphasis was on restoring political, economic or societal conditions to a period in the past, whether defined in terms of years, decades or centuries. Examples of such organizations would include the Irish Republican Army, the Basque separatist group, ETA, and of course, the Palestine Liberation Organization or PLO.

To the extent that such groups maintained political, economic or societal goals tied to specific conditions or objectives, they could claim that while violence was an unfortunate by-product of the struggle, the end could be said to justify the means. In this sense, their actions were *indirect* in that it was the changed condition itself that was the goal, not the violence: this is no longer the case. The first trend, then, in our revolution in terrorist affairs is this: that violence for its own sake is a worthy objective

"The implication of this trend is that violence for some terrorist groups is perhaps becoming less a means to an end (that therefore has to be tailored and explained and justified to the public) than an end in itself that does not require any wider explanation or justification beyond the group's members themselves and perhaps their followers."

There would appear to be some correlation between this propensity for violence (particularly on a larger and larger scale) and a shift from traditional terrorist motives to those of religious extremism and other 'single-issue' causes. Regardless of the motives, however, the revolutionary aspect of this trend is the willingness of terrorists to assume personal and organizational risk well out of proportion with the anticipated results. "In addition to the difficulties of attribution, some terrorist groups may also believe themselves to be invulnerable to retaliation, may be unconcerned by it, or even intend to provoke it."

Clearly, this willingness to accept or even welcome risk leads to a break-down of traditional risk analysis methodologies which typically assign resources on the basis of so-called rationale decision making processes. In the new paradigm of terrorism the players do not conform to the 'rationale actor model.' Martyrdom through suicide is

understood to be an essential aspect of the overall process and is not avoided, indeed, it the highest mark of success. Although it has been argued that suicide is considered a sin by all major religions, it is obvious that even the most devout can be forced, tricked or manipulated to meet the demands of a powerful figure or group. As a result, the constraints against large scale violence (including use of weapons of mass destruction), "will not apply if the group is pursuing chaos." If risk is considered a function of threat and probabilities then the actions of 9/11 clearly require a new calculus.

The second trend which is contributing to the revolution in terrorist affairs is the negation by terrorist groups of traditional international dispute resolution mechanisms. Such mechanisms – the nation state, diplomacy, the international legal system, and international organizations such as the United Nations – have been under stress since at least the end of the Cold War and certainly since the late 1990s. In order to appreciate the impact this trend has had on the trajectory of terrorism in the 21st century, we must be reminded of the euphoric predictions surrounding the fall of the 'evil empire' only a few short years ago.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the world looked forward to a 'new world order' dominated by international peace, stability and economic growth. The fear of large-scale war receded and nations were free to pursue independent paths towards social and economic justice. Organizations such as the United Nations, which had been largely hidebound in the Security Council, could now act to build true international consensus around such looming issues as population growth, health and the environment. It appeared as if the world could indeed get down to the business of economic growth and social harmony. Then along came reality.

By the late 1990s, many analysts characterized the 'new world order' as one of failed states and international chaos. There was a breakdown in governmental authority, the break-up of states and an increase in intra and international conflict largely based on tribe, ethnicity and religion. Massacres, concentration camps and a new horror 'ethnic cleansing' plunged many parts of Africa, Europe and elsewhere into a period of new barbarity and instability. For example, in 1993 approximately 48 ethnic wars were occurring throughout the world, not including some 164 border related disputes in the former Soviet Union, some 30 of which involved armed conflict. According to Michael Ignatieff, "They are wars of disintegration, between factions and bands, whose aims cannot be regarded even as political. They are fighting for drugs, for territory, for survival, and from the fighting radiates nothing but more chaos."

While this new period of instability unfolded, nation states found themselves with ever-decreasing capability to intervene in a meaningful way. The trend towards globalization which promised growth and prosperity throughout the 1980s, brought with it commensurate losses in state sovereignty and an ability to control or even monitor transnational problems such as criminal syndicates, narcotics flows, pollution, or weapons smuggling. In addition, an unintended and unforeseen by-product of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the loss of control over weapons grade nuclear materials and the standing up of new and lucrative markets in weapons of mass

destruction.

The loss of state power due to these and other transnational developments forced citizens to devolve power both up to seemingly more powerful international organizations and down to more localized, and therefore presumably more responsive, sub-state ones. Both efforts failed. For example, while various international organizations intervened or attempted to intervene in many conflicts throughout the 1990s,

"the truth is more equivocal: Kurds were saved from extermination, but have no state of their own and continue to live on the sufferance of four malignant neighbors; the Somali famine was palliated, but the rule of the gunmen was not ended; Saddam was punished but not toppled; the West prevented the Bosnian Muslims from being wiped out, but did not prevent the dismemberment of their state."

For the West, the newly minted concept of 'human security' permitted international intervention frequently in contradiction of national sovereignty and international law. Institutions such as the UN, the World Court and others were commonly labeled as instruments of Western (read U.S.) foreign policy. Interventions would be mounted (according to the critics) only when it suited U.S. national security or economic interests or when the stakes weren't very high. If the U.N. could see fit to intervene to eradicate excesses in the Balkans, why not in the Middle East to address Israeli treatment of displaced Palestinians ?

This seeming uneven application of international interventionism was not offset by local successes as most of the troubled states simply did not have the capability or will to deal with their own dissolution and the contending problems of mass poverty, ethnic hatreds and local jealousies. Ignatieff again:

"In a world in which nations once capable of imperial burdens are no longer willing to shoulder them, it is inevitable that many of the states created by de-colonization should prove unequal to the task of maintaining civil order. Such nations have achieved self-determination on the cruelest possible terms."

The net result for many of the persons trapped in these dysfunctional states and proto-states was simply to take matters into their own hands. If the international court of public opinion could sway U.S. politicians and U.N. officials to take action, then in *that* court would they be heard. While it is important to underscore the danger of moral relativism, the fact is that many of the terrorist causes the West now seeks to understand (presumably in order to address or eliminate) may be found in the frustration over a lack of seemingly viable alternatives. To the extent that the traditional nation state and its various international appendages appear incapable or unwilling to address fundamental and intransigent issues (such as in Ireland, the Congo or the Middle East), these regions will continue to breed extremists willing to take the not illogical step towards terrorism. But whence the revolution ?

The revolutionary aspect of this trend is the negation by terrorists of the international system *in toto*. Because they believe that the international instruments of law and diplomacy serve only the interests of their enemies, terrorists have nothing to lose by ignoring them. That the West continues to operate on the basis of laws of 'war' and of

'peace' only serves to make them a more ponderous, and therefore more attractive, target. Such niceties as declaring war are not required, or expected. For example, in the early 1990s it was obvious to CIA operatives that the *jihad* or holy war between Islam and America wasn't just a possibility, it was already underway.

Similarly, terrorists also recognize that Western nations use these international structures to ensure a stable balance of power thereby marginalizing smaller and weaker states and sub-state organizations. In such conditions, these marginalized players may fear outright defeat (perhaps fuelled by a perception of inferiority) or, at the very least, a fear of declining capability against ongoing evolutionary change on the part of other stronger actors. Such conditions logically lead to the adoption by weaker players of asymmetric strategies to offset the advantages of the stronger. This leads to our third trend underscoring the revolution in terrorist affairs, namely, the adoption by terrorist organizations of the processes and techniques of the other revolution, the revolution in military affairs, or RMA. If RMA is considered an appropriate model to describe large scale changes in military forces at state level, it may also be a useful model to describe how the strategic changes underway in terrorism described above are being operationalized.

RMA may be defined as a “discontinuous increase in military capability and effectiveness arising from simultaneous and mutually supportive change in technology, systems, operational methods and military organizations”. What distinguishes revolution from evolution is recognition and acceptance of fundamental change by those involved. The essence of the revolution is not necessarily the invention of new technology, but discovery of innovative ways to organize, operate, and employ technology such as the internet or, in the case of 9/11, aircraft. Such revolutions occur

“when the application of technologies in a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organizational adaptation in a way that fundamentally alters the character and conduct of conflict. It does so by producing a dramatic increase – often an order of magnitude or greater- in the combat potential and military effectiveness of armed forces.”

An RMA increases combat effectiveness by four types of simultaneous and mutually supportive change: technological change; systems development; operational innovation; and, organizational adaptation. The events of 9/11 (and possibly the anthrax campaign) would suggest that terrorist organizations are engaged with and benefiting from such changes. As already suggested, the application of this model to changes underway in the realm of terrorism can only approximate developments underway in state level militaries. For example, the utilization of stand-off precision guided munitions and other advanced weapon systems combined with advanced communications is frequently cited as a feature of the RMA. While such systems are clearly not part of the terrorist inventory, (at least to date) it is interesting to note that the development of such systems is largely driven by the desire to emphasize ‘effects’ rather than objects.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the revolution in terrorist affairs is "anti-RMA" in nature. While RMA emphasizes non-lethality, terrorism, as previously described, now emphasizes large-scale violence for its own sake. At the same time,

because the RMA is essentially state-centric in nature, operational war-fighting concepts are designed around the 'perfect opponent' ie. a middle-level enemy with rigid, centralized decision making relying on limited range, easy-to-detect weapons platforms (tanks, conventional artillery, manned aircraft). Terrorism is, by definition, asymmetrical. It operates primarily at the lower end of the conflict spectrum in a widely dispersed fashion with a limited electronic signature and requires only modest levels of combat effectiveness to be successful in terms of desired psychological effects. In spite of these dissimilarities, the adoption of innovative technologies; improvements in systems; operational innovation, and organizational adaptation by terrorist organizations in the early 21st century strongly suggests that at least a *parallel* to the RMA is underway.

"At the operational level, the impact of these coherent operations is to overwhelm the opponent's ability to command and control his forces, denying him the ability to respond to our campaign plan and operations, and forcing him at the limit to execute only uncoordinated preplanned actions."

The fourth, and final, trend in the revolution in terrorist affairs is a visible shift in the broad structures of history. Put simply, "the clearest conclusion to emerge from the events of September 11 is that *the geographical position and the military power of the U.S. are no longer sufficient to ensure its security.*" To what extent does this fact suggest that the dominant role of the U.S. in international affairs is on the wane? Is it possible that the power and success of the U.S. and the West in general in economic and conventional military terms has shifted the international struggle onto a different playing field? If so, what does this herald for the future of warfare? If not, what changes must the U.S. and its allies undergo in order to address this revolutionary new threat?

The notion that the U.S. will ultimately "fall" is not new. Historians have traced the rise and fall of ancient and modern empires and are in general agreement that, regardless of how powerful, no empire will remain dominant forever. In the past, empires have lost their relative position in the world as a result of wars or through moral and economic stagnation. The absence of a powerful enemy does not guarantee success over the long term. The coming of peace "does not stop this process of continual change; and the differentiated pace of economic growth among the Great Powers ensures that they will go on, rising and falling, relative to each other." Some analysts would suggest that this time, however, conditions *are* different. The United States maintains a huge lead in economic and military power over every other conceivable competitor. No other nation is capable of allocating over \$300 billion each year to national defence and it is estimated that it would take another advanced state 20-30 years to even begin to 'catch-up.'

There is, of course, a great deal of speculation regarding the potential for a 'successor' to the United States. China, India, Russia and a unified European state have all been suggested. At the same time, each of these potential successor states have been found wanting for a variety of reasons. In reality, this line of argument is too limited as it ignores other trends which could, if taken to extremes, undermine the efficacy of the nation-state itself, regardless of how powerful it may be.

While there is no clearly identifiable *successor state* to the U.S. at this time there are numerous potential *successor scenarios*, all of which are already a feature of the international landscape. For example, nation-states may ultimately be supplanted by religious empires (with Islam the leading contender); corporate-states which are defined by the integrative and directing power of the corporation (completely independent of cultural, social or geographical restraints); global criminal syndicates which control significant resources and territory and are, for all intents and purposes, a type of 'nation'; and civilizational 'black-holes' incorporating failed states, proto-states, permanent international welfare cases, permanently polluted regions, militarized zones in which a constant state of war exists and massive groups of displaced and or diseased peoples. While these scenarios do not necessarily require the elimination of the nation-state *per se* in order to emerge and flourish, it is clear that the emergence of such scenarios singularly or in combination will challenge even the most advanced nations and will require significant strategic choices.

How is the United States beginning to deal with this strategic challenge to its dominant global role ? Not surprisingly, following 9/11 much attention has been paid to failures in intelligence gathering and a wholesale response mechanism involving all aspects of national security kicked-in. Beyond this obvious and not unexpected reaction, the U.S. is beginning to undergo a soul-searching experience in order to attempt to define its place in the next phase of history. In fact, the requirement for such analysis is not new:

"The task facing American statesmen over the next decades, therefore, is to recognize that broad trends are underway, and that there is a need to 'manage' affairs so that the relative erosion of the United States' position takes place slowly and smoothly, and is not accelerated by policies which bring merely short-term advantage but longer term dis-advantage."

Americans were forced by 9/11 to re-examine not only their own role in the world, but to attempt to place events in a broader strategic framework. A series of questions emerged in the popular discourse that, previous to 9/11, were the purview of political scientists and Sunday morning pundits. What is the true nature of Islam ? How can the U.S. maintain its open society in the face of such threats ? How can terrorists be identified without infringing on civil liberties ? Why does the rest of the world seem to hate us ? Such questions, and the answers that flow from them, will determine the strategic course that the U.S. will follow in the near and mid-future. "This raises then, the ultimate political question, and an insidious one: is the very striving for the maintenance of America's present place in the world actually desirable ?"

Niall Ferguson asserts that the U.S. ceased to be invulnerable long before September 11 and that this particular event should not dissuade the U.S. from continuing to pursue its global mandate. He argues that even after big defence cuts, the United States is still the world's only superpower and that the United Nations is incapable of coping with the challenge of global disorder without strong U.S. leadership. America can and must afford global empire. At the same time he recognizes, however, that the means of destruction have never been cheaper and that the U.S. needs to do more to impose order on rogue states.

"Whether we accept that transformation gracefully and manage the relative change in America's world position with adroitness - or, instead, resent and combat that secular trend, insisting that the U.S. is exceptional - may be the biggest strategic question of all."

The notion that the U.S. is exceptional, that is outside, the norms of history lies at the heart of the problem. Kissinger summarized his view of the future U.S. challenge in just such terms.

"In launching itself for the third time this century on creating a new world order, America's dominant task is to strike a balance between the twin temptations inherent in its exceptionalism: the notion that America must remedy every wrong and stabilize every dislocation, and the latent instinct to withdraw into itself."

These themes of engagement and isolationism have been present throughout the so-called "American century" and it is unlikely that the U.S. will choose one over the other exclusively. To the extent that it must remain engaged economically and militarily in order to ensure its own stability and security, the U.S. must also develop appropriate homeland defence policies which reflect its values and social mores.

Beyond this, however, lies a more difficult challenge, namely, living in a world that does not share, perhaps detests, the very values and mores on which American society is founded. More than one empire has floundered on the misshapen belief that its role was to proselytize and here again, Kissinger is insightful. In his view, Americans' hope for the future is based on

" a reflection of the pervasive national belief that new departures are always possible. In the real world, such transformations are rarely observed in individuals, even less so among nations which are composites of many individual choices."

Pre-revolutionary terrorism sought to turn the clock backwards - it now seeks to *accelerate* history in order to bring about a true new international order. What virtually all of these terrorist orders have in common is that none of them includes the U.S. continuing in its dominant role. According to Anthony Cordesman,

" Groups and individuals may emerge that are willing to attack the U.S. homeland with little regard to U.S. retaliation and few goals other than causing the maximum amount of damage to American citizens and institutions. Their political agendas could include complex political and religious ideologies, pragmatic strategic and tactical objectives, or paranoid fantasies. Such attackers could also be American, rather than foreign."

It has been suggested that perhaps terrorism as we have come to know it is no longer terrorism but rather a harbinger or a leading indicator of the changing character of international conflict itself." Increasingly, the traditional measures of conflict - low, medium and high intensity - are inadequate to describe the new paradigm. Taken to this logical end, terrorism is no longer terrorism but true asymmetric warfare with the goal of dislodging and hastening the decline of the U.S. from its dominant international position. Cordesman again:

"There is good reason to use the word "war" rather than "terrorism" since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. It may be valid to label state actors as "terrorists" when they or their proxies

attack innocent civilians or economic targets without a declaration of war. However, such labeling has a heavy emotional content that it may lead U.S. planners to pay insufficient attention to the fact that most hostile states have little choice other than to wage asymmetric warfare and may pursue rationale and focused strategies that are only acts of "terrorism" when seen from an American perspective."

What then are the discernible features of this new form of warfare ?

First, it may be argued that asymmetric warfare is not in itself a new phenomenon. Niche challengers, for example Mao and Giap, have challenged U.S. supremacy at other times and in other places. In the pre-revolutionary context, terrorism was frequently characterized as a form of insurgency or other precursor to formal military operations and indeed this was often the case. In the revolutionary context, terrorist actions themselves constitute military operations on a larger and larger scale; it has been suggested, for example, that the drive to acquire WMD represents the next phase of the terrorist campaign.

Second, the strategies selected by revolutionary terrorists have also expanded to incorporate attacks at the operational and strategic centres of gravity. Stephan Possony describes this as a shift from private to strategic terrorism. The revolutionary emphasis is on maintaining the offensive by achieving a "militarily decisive *fait accompli* prior to outside intervention, reversible only at high cost to the intervening parties." Further, attacks on civilian targets in the United States itself conform to the basic operational tenet of shaping the future battlespace both inside and outside the theatre of operations. To the extent that the U.S. defines the *world* as its theatre of interest, this has a significant implication with respect to when and where terrorists may choose to act.

Finally, the tactics, techniques and procedures available to the new terrorist, as illustrated by 9/11, are equally unbridled. Having almost devastated the airline industry, analysts now predict that the maritime industry is next. The ability to 'think outside the box' has been supplanted by thinking outside the box cutter. In pre-revolutionary terms, terrorist organizations were typically characterized as either state-sponsored or 'private' with the latter meant to describe small, cellular groups of limited means and reach. Today's terrorists combine the 'best' of both with a degree of sophistication previously displayed by governments and high-tech agencies. While front-line martyrs may display all of the necessary mindless fury, behind them are men and women of high commitment, high ideals and breathtaking organizational ability. Many terrorists now sport graduate degrees in engineering, chemistry, physics and medicine frequently obtained (just to add insult to injury) in prestigious western universities.

A revolution in terrorist affairs is underway. Like most revolutions, this one was both unexpected and unwelcome. More than merely challenging western society around the edges, this revolution seeks the absolute overthrow of nation, state, society, and many would argue, western culture itself. Underlying this revolution are four independent and yet synergistic trends. The high-sounding trend emphasizing 'direct effects' obscures the brutal reality that large-scale death and destruction is the new norm. Conscious rejection of international law and the foundations of basic civilized discourse throws us all 'back to the future.' Adoption of the methods and techniques of the western revolution in

military affairs has unleashed terrorists with global reach and global destructive power. The net result is a western, and particularly American, society teetering on the edge of permanent siege mentality and tempted to discard the civil and social values on which the strength of that society is founded, and its only saving grace.

As the airliner glides serenely towards the tower, what does it mean to adjust sensibly to the newer world order ? *A couple more bursts and they're goin' right through*, he thought.

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