

Security Issues in the 21st Century: An Intelligence Perspective

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The world is now over ten years into the most far-reaching, multi-dimensional, revolutionary change since World War I and its aftermath. After a century of war that saw the demise of ancient empires and the victory of democracy and market economics over Nazi and Communist totalitarianisms and their statist ideologies, the world has been transformed, but the future is still murky.

There are awesomely encouraging developments underway across the globe - from Russia and China to India, the Middle East and elsewhere. But there is a parallel reality: a world that also is more unstable, more unpredictable, more turbulent (in many respects more violent) than the world we left behind with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is this parallel reality that concentrates the attention of intelligence agencies and officers.

Unlike most politicians, who prefer to focus on opportunities, promises, positive developments, and achievements, the intelligence officer by mission and charter pays attention to threats and challenges. He may downplay a threat or emphasize it, or simply place it in a larger context, but the dark side of human (and governmental) behavior is still the focus of his attention. As a consequence, the intelligence officer is rarely glad-handed by the politician or decision-maker. He is the dark cloud too often looming over their parade.

He was a necessary evil in the politician's eye during the cold war. The threat was so cosmic, the dangers so immense, that his descriptions of that threat were understood as critically important.

Thus, the intelligence officer always had a seat at the table and an important voice at any hearing. Indeed, decision-makers heeded his analysis and relied upon his data as the most comprehensive and reliable available, especially for military planning and for arms control. His warnings were taken seriously.

Then the cold war ended. Throughout the West, just as in 1918 and 1945, politicians and citizens relaxed and assumed that in the post Cold-War “new world order,” no more serious security threats and challenges would surface. Consequently, most countries moved promptly to reduce support for national security: the military, diplomatic, and intelligence instruments that had played a critical role in the Cold War.

Unfortunately, these changes, although prompted by genuinely transforming and positive developments, blissfully ignored the parallel reality: the continuing threats to peace, democracy, and stability around the world. Unlike those of the Cold War, these threats are more difficult to see, quantify, describe, and deal with.

The list of threats is familiar: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, with over two dozen nations possessing chemical and biological weapons and more than 40 with ballistic missiles; global organized crime, with resources and technology far beyond those of most governments, and with national and regional criminal structures collaborating around the world rather than competing; terrorism, no longer so much state supported as promoted by powerful religious, ethnic, and political forces ranging across borders; ethnic conflict reaching genocidal proportions in the Balkans, Africa, and elsewhere; potential regional aggressors, as seen a decade ago in the Persian Gulf and now in Africa; and worrying tensions between India and Pakistan, both armed with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The list goes on.

A few political leaders take these challenges seriously, but many others rarely look beyond their own borders—even if those borders are crossed daily by individuals and/or groups engaged in such activities as described above. Even in the countries where the challenges are taken seriously, too many leaders refuse to provide intelligence the necessary resources to produce the quality information needed for informed decisions. So capabilities are spread even more thinly, and the chances of a serious intelligence failure grow, a failure that could cost many lives.

In truth, the threats of the Cold-War time were so awesome that leaders could readily galvanize support for the instruments of national security; but the security challenges and threats of the early 21st century are so diverse, so seemingly distant, and, at this point, so indistinct to the untrained eye, that few political leaders are even trying to muster the resources needed to deal successfully with them.

In sum, serious security threats and challenges continue to exist at the outset of the 21st century and are constantly increasing. Because they seem remote, diverse, not so worrisome seen singly, and so modest compared to the danger of a superpower nuclear confrontation or a NATO-Warsaw Pact war in Europe, they fail to excite the concern necessary to provide the resources to deal with them. That may be the ultimate tragedy. For security threats today are mostly manageable, containable, or solvable. But tomorrow, that likely will not be the case. And, it seems too often, intelligence officers—focused on the dark side—are among the few who understand the threats, the opportunity to deal with them, and how much more costly the remedies will be tomorrow than they are today. Unfortunately, it appears that no one is listening.