Report

The future of global conflict: trends and challenges towards 2040

Monday 16 – Wednesday 18 February 2015 | WP1374

In association with:
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Background

The meeting, the 8th in the annual ‘Futures’ series, convened over 60 participants from 20 countries to discuss the future of global conflict, drawing on the expertise of policy professionals, futurists, academics, private sector and subject experts from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds.

The meeting examined the evolving scale, range and definition of conflict; considered what types of conflicts will be fought in the future and where; and how should strategy and doctrine evolve to meet these challenges. Themes included: the role of international alliances, diplomacy and development in both conflict prevention and resolution; who will be the main actors and what are the drivers and threats?

Introduction, or the perennial ‘newness’ of thinking on war

1. In February 2013 the chief of the general staff of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gerasimov, wrote an article arguing that twenty-first century conflict blurs the lines between peace and war: ‘a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war’. The human cost of war is extraordinary. For many practitioners, Michael Ignatieff’s comments give voice to their recent experience and their hope for the future that ‘the tectonic plates of a world order being pushed apart by the volcanic upward pressure of violence and hatred’. The cost of conflict for poor, marginalised people is horrific and extraordinary. There is an assumption that the world is far from less violent. The locality and character of war may have shifted, but its spectre is more persistent and profitable than ever.

2. It is extraordinarily difficult to communicate, in policy terms or to the public, that a set of expensive actions has no hope of solving a problem, but could perhaps make something ‘less bad’. It is even more complex when practitioners tasked with devising the strategies are committed to a logic wherein problems can be solved. A state’s appetite for tackling threats is more about the public’s attitude of what they are willing to tolerate, particularly after a decade of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than a propaganda campaign, the international community needs to have clarity in what they are going to do, how it is going to work, and then plausibly communicate that to the public.

3. But how to write a story when the archetypes are all wrong? The very rules of war have changed, argued General Gerasimov, with non-military methods – including political, societal and informational activities – exceeding the power of conventional weapons of war. However, hybrid forms of warfare – whether they are categorised as hybrid, asymmetric or ambiguous – are not new or unique. Even if the historical gaze is limited to recent decades, the use of special forces and proxy warfare has occurred in Asia since the latter part of the twentieth century. What is being perfected now is the combination of special operations forces, perhaps with an internal opposition, augmented by non-military methods that exploit the asymmetric advantages of...
The allegiances of our enemies are ambiguous and their aims alien to our norms.

For many, violence is a daily struggle to survive with no space for philosophy.

People, poverty and politics

7. In contemporary and future conflicts most violence is directed towards civilians. Although contested, the idea that contemporary war is ‘surgical’ and has decreasing numbers of casualties obscures the fact that these wars cause untold violence and suffering beyond the recognisable battlefield. Violence judged through a metric of displaced peoples tells a very different story: for example, over eight million people displaced from Syria, five million internally displaced people within Syria, and roughly half a million displaced within Ukraine. Consequently, there can be scepticism of the claim that the world is becoming more peaceful.

8. The future of conflict is simultaneously global and local: for a refugee, conflict is experienced in years and decades, with the consequences of a month-long ‘limited liability intervention’ echoing for generations. If a refugee has been displaced for more than five years it is highly likely that they will be so for over twenty years. Displacement is a way of establishing political control by removing opponents and establishing alternative mechanisms of governance, generally through atrocities including indiscriminate murders, gendered violence and the destruction of cultural heritage as a mechanism for mobilising fear.

9. Violence is about politics rather than policy. And violence is intrinsic to democracy and state-building. Many new conflicts start with liberation or democratic movements – such as Bosnia, Syria and Ukraine – that are channelled into sectarian conflicts. In a localised mirroring of international peacebuilding, democracy movements include a middle class that ‘employs’ poorer, working class people to fight. In the transformation to sectarian conflicts, the movement shifts from an aspiration for emancipation to the capturing of power for extremists.

10. The international community’s response to new conflicts is overwhelmingly state-centric and curiously delusional regarding the violence involved in state formation. State building is a normative activity, and can be a violent one. To build a state is often to...
...a more local and less securitised approach is important.

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11. There is clear evidence that state-centric approaches to resolving conflict have negative impacts on the environment: elites capture resources in the name of, or in opposition to, the state and thereby fuel further conflict. Moreover, framing efforts in fragile spaces as a security threat to donor countries brings out the worst aspects of state building: a concentration on structuring the coercive aspects of the state such as the police and armed forces. The selective formation of only some state apparatus is exacerbated by United Nations’ restoration of state authority missions that, with limited resources, construct a faint image of a state; an artifice without programmatic funds that collapses when the mission withdraws. In some countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, the international community’s continued involvement in the formation of the state is one of the main problems in resolving the conflict. Consequently, a more local and less securitised approach is important.

12. There should be caution in the expectation that the international community is able to counter traditional inequalities and problems in governance. Even the most sophisticated states are poor at solving problems without resorting to violence. The lack of capacity within states to deliver services and the rise of competitors offering viable alternatives to the state, ranging from radical or extremist actors through to the private sector, are a universal challenge to all states around the world. This challenge originates as much from autocratic criticisms of the democratic model’s ability to deliver goods and services as from an extremist’s ironic criticism of the absence of moral standards. Neither must the distrust of government authority be rational to be powerful: the Ebola crisis revealed that in Liberia, despite ten years of peacekeeping, a significant part of the population thought that their own government had released Ebola as a fundraising project. That authority is further undermined by challenges to the state’s freedom and autonomy of action and will elicit surprisingly similar responses: for example, the United States drone campaigns are more a demonstration of action to a domestic populace than a coherent strategic vision. The same analysis could be applied to the actions of the Russian Federation in challenging NATO. We can expect greater challenges to the secrecy of government, with demands for transparency and an increasing awareness of opaque state or state-supported behaviour.

13. Despite the challenges to state authority there should not be an expectation of a general failure of governance. Many of the major conflicts of the 1990s have gone, and many that have not are less violent. Further, many of the chronic conflicts of the 1990s have shown positive changes, including Liberia and Sierra Leone; that they did not fall apart when dealing with Ebola is a remarkable achievement and some reassurance that international activities to support state formation can have limited success.

14. However, the World Bank estimates that 1.2 billion people live in fragile environments and that this number may double by 2030. That the international community has experienced limited success in the past is not a reason for reassuring self-congratulation: the difficulty in addressing future problems is greater and the consequences potentially more severe. A disturbing consequence of recognising the scale of the problem and the finite nature of the resources and ability to counter it, is the assumption that the best the international community can do will be to contain the problem. Containment, rather than resolution, gives the impression of dancing in a pressure cooker while millions of people experience daily, horrific violence.

Institutions underpin [undermine] our response

15. The instruments available are weak: the humanitarian system is constructed to deal with natural disasters and chronic caseloads of weather-induced crises; politicians and
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Violent antagonists have been successful in forming new types of agile organisations, capable of combining terrorist, criminal, conventional military and economic activities into a political entity.

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...overly technocratic responses can exacerbate violence...

governments underestimate the resources and time required to undertake an international activity; the organisations called on to respond with agility, flexibility and imagination are often rigidly conservative; and the tendency of government and international organisations is to focus on the visible short-term problems rather than long-term threats. The existing structures and systems do not provide the necessary framework for rapid and effective decision making. However, the international community cannot afford to waste vast resources in order to achieve very little, with an inter-generational cost of post-conflict care and a public suspicious of politicians and sceptical of the efficacy of international intervention.

16. Sharing the burden by broadening the collaborations between states is an obvious efficiency. However, collaborations between bureaucracies within a state are notoriously difficult and costly: effective international responses to conflict will require coherence between multiple state bureaucracies that follow divergent cultural, linguistic, and organisational logics. The cost of internationalisation could, theoretically, be even greater than the cost of individual state action.

17. Moreover, coherence or a comprehensive approach may not always be the best course of action. States think in universal abstractions – a comprehensive approach is the best of all approaches at all times – while simultaneously espousing a localised, contextual approach to international intervention as best practice. There may be occasions, where some components of the state may be unwelcome or unsuited to certain types or location for intervention. For example, humanitarian action often relies on the logic of non-interference or non-alignment, whereas most development is in the service of state formation, itself a highly aligned political act.

18. Large state organisations and the international community have co-opted the language of critique, creativity and innovation without fundamentally altering their organisational logic. Simply articulating that the question should be asked does not challenge assumptions: action must follow, especially if part of the justification of doing so is to appear more credible to our interlocutors. Some aspects of organisations will remain the same because of intransigent geopolitical positions: for example, the United Nations will not have a standing army and will rely on the scarce contributions of member states, hence peacekeepers will be hard to come by. However, reform of the United Nations Security Council – potentially expansion without changing the veto – would add considerable legitimacy to the organisation and could be feasible before 2040. Violent antagonists have been successful in forming new types of agile organisations, capable of combining terrorist, criminal, conventional military and economic activities into a political entity. Therefore the apparent inability of many mature national and international organisations to enact meaningful changes to their underpinning logics – hierarchical, race, class, gendered, age, technical, and so on – is, arguably, a major threat to national security.

19. International organisations need to demonstrate credibility in performing their core mandate: the European Union should demonstrate economic growth; and NATO needs to demonstrate a will to undertake collective defence, appropriately resourced by member states. In order to advocate for this system elsewhere, such as an equivalent of NATO in Asia, there needs to be proof of its ability to function in the twenty-first century.

20. Similarly, coopting technical best practice and technological innovation are not panaceas. A curious development in the professionalisation agenda is that knowledge is detached, generalisable and transferable: international ‘professions’ adhere to the same mantra, with technical specialists in development independent of the site to which the development will be applied. Without addressing local understanding of actions, sites, and identities, overly technocratic responses can exacerbate violence and provide elites with material to use against other actors in the state.

21. A less technical and securitised approach need not necessarily exclude state formation from outside experts. A civil service mentoring programme was established in South
Sudan, bringing in Ugandan and Kenyan civil servants to explain their system and support the creation of viable bureaucratic design for South Sudan. By bringing in bureaucrats experienced in small, imperfect government ministries, rather than advocating best practice in organisational design, the processes developed were localised and sustainable. Nonetheless, the process ultimately failed because it was not linked to the political context.

Nostalgia for norms

22. The institutions with a remit to respond to conflict struggle to do so. The origin of some of that struggle is normative. The antagonists of the present and the future reject many of the normative premises upon which the international system is formed. They do not adhere to the rules codified throughout the twentieth century, from territorial integrity to the law of armed conflict. Some actors, while not adhering to the rules nonetheless purport, strongly and publicly, to uphold them. Others condemn the hypocrisy of a system of rules that reify extreme inequality in many parts of the world. Horrifically, some actors commit atrocities on people because of the norms that they represent, consciously or by accident of birth.

23. The geopolitical assumptions of the international community have proven to be hollow: that great powers would abide by the rules, treaties, and the renunciation of the use of force; that the Western model would drag powers into interdependencies and economic trade that would provide an incentive to avoid conflict; and that the weight of oligarchs would always win over militaristic and geopolitical forces. The entire Western model’s normative framework is seriously challenged, a trend that is likely to increase between now and 2040.

24. Many conflict mediation practitioners are nostalgic for a period that existed in the past (or a myth of that past) when there were coherent, disciplined military factions with whom you could mediate. This does not exist within most conflicts faced by the UN: there is very little horizontal or vertical cohesion within conflict protagonists—oftentimes the military groups fragment at the conclusion of an agreement. Consequently, mediators need to engage at multiple levels and international organisations have very limited mechanisms and few resources for doing so. Similarly, geopolitical strategists are drawn to a myth of simpler times, such as an ahistorical interpretation of the Cold War, in which conflict was minimal and carefully contained within an organised bipolar international system.

25. But even while recognising the inherent tensions, contradictions, and complexities of responding to global conflict, organisations such as the United Nations and European Union should resurrect some transformative zeal. International organisations need to restart the magnetic power of globalised norms and be confident in adapting those ideas to include non-Western norms, allowing themselves to be influenced and led by non-Western leadership. These opportunities exist: there has been a shift in the non-aligned movement towards principles on the use of force and an increase in conflict mediation and human rights components in peacekeeping. African countries, with direct experience of the African Union in responding to Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda, are favouring stronger UN Security Council resolutions and operations. Similarly, the Arab League’s position regarding Libya and the Gulf Cooperation Council interacting with the UN to call for more robust responses, indicate that the old international organisations are still relevant. Moreover, a historical analysis of international collaboration need not paint an unduly pessimistic picture: for example, until the formation of the International Criminal Court in the 1990s, in the preceding fifty years there was limited accountability for those who had committed atrocities. National and international public opinion, and with it transformative political will, can materialise with just as little warning as the next threat.
Policy comments

1. The interconnected nature of the world is an opportunity. Historical and cultural relationships between states and regional groups are a network that can be accessed by third parties for mutual advantage. Consequently, using all of the good offices of a state to arrange access for non-European third parties can yield unexpected successes, particularly in conflict mediation and post-conflict development.

2. Similarly, ad-hoc regional alliances – facilitated and empowered by international organisations – can contribute a great deal to regional stability.

3. Geopolitics underpinned by military cartographic strategies is outdated. For many states, a pragmatic focus that creates mature capabilities is more valuable to allies than capacity in scale. For civilian agencies, depth of knowledge and languages in some areas and regions is more useful than shallow technical awareness. For armed forces, sophisticated deployable headquarters can be the distinction between credible allies and political freeloaders.

4. Small states rely on allies to make their contribution to international interventions credible, and so increased cooperation in peacetime could create stronger alliances for future action.

5. Many non-Western states are willing to commit troops to peacebuilding but could significantly benefit from military training and partnering. However, the form of that training must be specific to the context of the receiving forces and not based on whatever resources are available.

6. The public narrative requires constant attention and must be authentic and at least somewhat rational. For example, why are some states trying to convince the public to increase defence spending while simultaneously arguing that there are few military answers to international problems.

7. The ‘containment’ of security problems has a major, unrecognised human cost. It is vital that politicians and policy-makers understand the long-term consequences of failing to tackle human suffering.

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