



Strategic Trends 2007-2036 Right Horizon Scanning, Wrong Military Responses

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FOR BETTER or worse, every time a new security concern emerges, there is almost always one question that dominates thinking – what will be the military role or response to this new security concern? Such thinking highlights the centrality of the military organisation in all matters concerning the security of the state.

However, is it possible that such emphasis on the military is at best misplaced, if not potentially dangerous? The United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence recently released its *Strategic Trends 2007-2036*, a document that outlines its vision of the future trends that can affect global and national security, and the military-strategic implications of these possible developments. This document may well turn out to be a case of spotting the right long-term potential security concerns, but identifying the wrong national responses to these long-term concerns.

Bleak Future?

The picture that is developed in the document is one that is on balance bleak. It highlights a number of potential fault lines. One is on the expectation that economic growth will continue, even if patterns of economic growth will be unevenly distributed, resulting in increasing levels of deprivation and poverty. Globalised communications will, if anything, feed frustrations over relative deprivation by heightening awareness of these uneven patterns of economic development.

A second potential fault line lies in the apparently contradictory trends of the growing centrality of English as the lingua franca of global business and politics, sitting in juxtaposition with the growing contacts between diverse cultures as a result of globalisation, creating the conditions for people to become increasingly comfortable with cultural diversity. This will coincide with increasing secularism and materialism, moral relativism and pragmatism; these trends will trigger reactions from 'complex, traditionally-defined communities', harkening back to Huntington's clash of civilisations thesis.

A third potential fault line lies with be the increasing centrality of resource scarcity – with particular emphasis on water, but also on energy and other natural resources of strategic value. Maintaining access to these resources will be the key, especially since many strategic resources are located in areas of dubious security, raising the likelihood of resorting to military force to secure these strategic resources.

The Military and Fault Lines

Where is the role of the military organisation in all of these potential fault lines? The

document portrays the growing disparities in the global military balance as another potential fault line; these disparities are the result of ever increasing costs of military research and development, leading to increasing trends of centralisation of military industry, cross-border collaborations and defence internationalisation and globalisation. However military technologies have increasingly short life spans, making technological obsolescence increasingly rapid.

The military balance also will be increasingly complicated by proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear, or the so-called CBRN weapons – as the military technological spread outlined earlier continues. There is already the emergence of important new defence industrial players such as Brazil and South Africa. What is likely to happen is that more and more countries will acquire significant technological capabilities that will cross over into the possible production of CBRN weapons.

However, there is a serious disjuncture between the various fault lines identified in the document. No where is this disjuncture more obvious than in the juxtaposition between the bleak social-economic outlooks and the continuing emphasis on CBRN proliferation. No doubt, CBRN weapons represent the worst kinds of weapons humanity has ever devised. The social-economic deprivations that the document outline contain the potential for causing new waves of conflict and violence, whether at the level of inter-state wars, internal conflicts and civil wars, or the so-called asymmetric violence between state and non-state actors. In any of these conflict scenarios, the prospect of a single CBRN attack represents the worst-case scenario for just about any state. But the likelihood of a CBRN attack remains very small, given the technological hurdles that any actor – whether state or non-state – has to overcome in maintaining a CBRN arsenal and deploying it in war.

Small Arms Nightmare

A more plausible, and equally destructive, outcome is the proliferation of small arms and other man-portable weapons as rocket-propelled grenades, shoulder-launched missiles and anti-personnel mines. Already, such weapons kill more people every year than automobile accidents. Given the increasing number of national defence industries – all seeking the limited goal of self-sufficiency in small arms and ammunition production – the proliferation of small arms and these man-portable weapons represents the greater security concern for the immediate, medium and long terms. These are weapons that are easily smuggled, by both illegal criminal organisations as well as state organisations running so-called ‘black operations’ – supplying combatant parties in non-related conflicts with weaponry for economic-financial motives. The last scenario is not as far-fetched as some might think – witness the Iran-Contra scandal that broke out during the last years of the Reagan Administration in the United States or, more recently, the Abdul Qadeer Khan nuclear technology clandestine export network.

The bottom line is this: one may identify the likely fault lines – accepting that horizon scanning remains at best a newly conceived capability – but this good work can be undone if one subsequently identifies the wrong solutions or sees the wrong implications for national security. The *Strategic Trends 2007-2036* appears to be guilty of this. It identifies fault lines that few strategic and security analysts would disagree with, but the implications of these trends remain too rooted in the realm of military aspects of security. Not all security concerns affect military power, or can be addressed by military power. The trick lies in being open to this possibility.

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