

Keynote—Threat Convergence and Failing States: A New Agenda for Analysts

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Pauline H. Baker, President of The Fund for Peace, pioneered the methodology called CAST, the Conflict Assessment System Tool. It is the basis for the Failed States Index, the first attempt to rank countries by their risk of internal conflict. In collaboration with the team at The Fund for Peace, she oversaw the production and analysis of the Index, which was published in partnership with Foreign Policy magazine. Dr. Baker is a political scientist with over 40 years of experience working on issues concerning weak and failing states. She taught at the University of Lagos in Nigeria, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Georgetown University's School of Advanced International Studies. Dr. Baker was formerly staff director of the African Affairs Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. She has published over 80 articles, essays and books. She received her Doctorate from UCLA and her undergraduate degree from Douglass College, Rutgers University.

Thank you for inviting me to join you at this conference and asking me to address you today. The theme of this conference — “analysis for new and emerging societal conflicts”—could not be more timely. I want to discuss not only new methodologies, but also a new agenda that needs to be addressed in relation to current threats.

Over the last several years, governments with massive intelligence capabilities and huge defense budgets have made critical mistakes in addressing security issues. The 9/11 commission put it elegantly: it called the failure to anticipate the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon the product of a lack of “structured imagination,” the ability to apply a systematic approach to analyzing new and emerging security challenges, an approach, the commission observed, that is not known to prevail in bureaucracies.

But 9/11 was not the only major failure in strategic analysis. The other big one was Iraq. The Pentagon and most western international intelligence agencies failed to see how much years of misrule, sanctions and inspections had actually disarmed the regime of Saddam Hussein and decayed the Iraqi state. By 2003, Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction stockpile, after all, even though this was the primary justification for going to war. A third huge mistake was the failure to anticipate the full consequences of a military invasion of Iraq, including the possibility of Iraq imploding into a collapsed state, spawning a violent and sustained insurgency and a wave of terrorism by displaced Baathists and foreign jihadists. The insurgency has been able to depend upon a seemingly endless supply of suicidal fighters, weapons, and reliable supply lines from outside the country, resources that are enabling insurgents to undermine reconstruction and stabilization efforts – an outcome that was not anticipated by the Pentagon and other coalition forces.

The security environment for the world has changed radically as a result of such miscalculations, though the roots of new societal challenges go back decades. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus that 9/11 was the start of a new era. Many states – not just the US – have to cope with the political fallout from miscalculations made since then about what this new era looks like. Coalition allies are withdrawing from Iraq under domestic pressure. Security challenges in African states in remote regions, such as the Sahel, are being conflated with the war on terrorism, prompting new counter-terrorism programs in states that were once considered on the periphery of strategic concerns. Terrorists networks are expanding worldwide, including in central Europe, discovered to be a fund-raising, recruitment and smuggling base for operations for radical groups fighting in Iraq.

For its part, the U.S. is straining to fulfill its military requirements. Billions are being spent on Afghanistan and Iraq, and after two years of fighting, more than 1,700 soldiers have died and thousands have been wounded. The U.S. wants to downsize its forces in Iraq and projections are being made to target 2006 as the turnaround time, but past projections of a decrease in the insurgency have been overly optimistic and this one may be too. Due to political uncertainties on the ground and the difficulties of building an army from scratch, the timetable for turning over security to local Iraqi forces remains unsure, despite the restoration of legal sovereignty, intensive training of the military and police, and the holding of elections in January 2005. Instead of improving the security situation, after a temporary lull, deaths and destruction rose again, with the insurgency proving to be as strong as ever.

Iraq's future – even its existence as a unified state – remains an open question. And while there are hopeful signs of change in the Middle East as a whole – from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and a municipal election on a narrow franchise in Saudi Arabia– none of these trends suggests a straight line to peace and security. To the contrary, research has shown that as old power structures dissolve, they are often replaced by the strongest and best organized internal forces if central government institutions are not capable of managing the transition.

Two trends thus seem to be unfolding in the Middle East: a loosening of authoritarian control and a heightening of instability. Ironically, one of the unintended consequences of pressing for democratization is likely to be the rise of Shiite power and sectarian fighting in the Middle East. If the current balance of power in Iraq continues, the ultimate political outcome of the U.S. invasion might well be the first installation of a Shiite government in an Arab state in 1,000 years. In Lebanon, the withdrawal of Syrian forces is likewise probably going to give Hezbollah new-found power and legitimacy, as it partially fills the security vacuum left behind by withdrawing Syrian troops. Analytically, are we prepared to understand the full consequences of these trends?

What have we learned since 9/11 about new and emerging societal threats? Do we know how to identify what is “new” in the coming years or are we simply trying to avoid a repeat performance of what has occurred in the past?

In many respects, it appears that our approach is intuitive imagination, which basically is nothing more than dreaming up a number of worst case scenarios and seeing if we can organize a response. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, for instance, has listed 15 possible hypothetical nightmares for disaster planning in a new document called National Planning Scenarios. (The document was not supposed to be released to the public, but according to the New York Times, the list was inadvertently posted on a Hawaii state

government website.) Three of the 15 scenarios are natural disasters: a hurricane, an earthquake and an influenza pandemic. The others run the gamut of terrorist horrors, including the detonation of a 10 kiloton nuclear device in a central business district or major city and terrorists spraying a chemical blister agent from a small aircraft into a packed college football stadium.

But while there are detailed estimates of the possible damage from such events, there is no estimate of the likelihood of their occurrence, no analysis of the intelligence basis for assuming that such attacks are being planned, and no identification of priorities among them. And not every type of possible attack is identified. Airplane hijackings are excluded because response plans already exist to that kind of incident. Nor is there a specific terrorist organization identified: the various attacks are described as being conducted by a Universal Adversary.

The list of possible calamities was drawn up so that communities might have specific incidents in mind in preparing for a response. This is reasonable, but a better approach should have started with a sound analytical assessment of likely threats, relative priorities based on assessments of which are most likely, intelligence back up for such assessments coordinated with other agencies as mandated by the 9/11 Commission, and serious consideration of the types of organization that would have the capacity to launch such operations. Instead, the exercise produced a series of worse cast scenarios with no methodological rigor or empirical justification behind them.

The exercise was a way to decide how to allocate billions of federal funds to states and local governments, not to forecast future threats in a realistic analysis. As one commentator (who will remain unnamed) noted, this effort -- which includes more than 1,500 distinct tasks that might need to be performed to respond to such disasters -- is an example of a "Washington bureaucracy gone wild." Worse, in the opinion of this observer, it is an example of a bureaucracy gone to lunch. Faulty or non-existent analysis is no way to prepare communities for serious security threats or to dole out funds for that purpose. Moreover, publication of the National Planning Scenarios tips off terrorists to how ill-prepared we are and how little systematic analysis is going into the effort.

There is some good news on the analytical front. Since the 9/11 attacks, there has been a general consensus on the three top security threats: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and weak and failing states. The first two have been national security priorities for several decades, but the third is a relative newcomer in the strategic threat perception hierarchy, only becoming part of mainstream security thinking since the 2002 US National Security Strategy which stated bluntly and correctly that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than by failings ones. Previously, analysts believed that the major security dangers came from peer competitors, such as a rising China, or rogue states with nuclear capabilities, such as North Korea and Iran.

Defense stockpiles, military budgets, the size of rival armed forces and the growth of competitive economies were some of the key measures of power before. In today's world, those factors are not always good guides of impending threats. The real dangers we face today come from weak and failing states, or from stateless organizations such as Al Qaeda, which set up bases, recruit and train fighters, and generate black market operations in these ungoverned spaces. Smuggling pipelines for small arms and light weapons are supplying guerrillas and insurgents who are fighting in shifting terrain. Such networks cannot be

identified by looking at government defense budgets or arms stockpiles. Individual entrepreneurs – from warlords and human traffickers to religious leaders and nuclear scientists – are opening up new lines of power and influence, many of which are self-sustaining and self-financing. These are also moving into well-governed states, such as Europe, where they can use information technology and commercial globalization to communicate with their followers, set up funding mechanism for dirty money, and supply their warriors across porous borders.

The fact of the matter is that there are probably more serious and imminent threats we face from individuals and networks they run than from emerging nuclear states, such as North Korea and Iran. These are threats, however, that are linked. Pakistan's A.Q. Khan sold nuclear materials and expertise to rogue states and, possibly, other individuals or stateless organizations. Indeed, the major doomsday scenario that keeps security analysts awake at night is WMD ending up in the hands of Al Qaeda or another jihadist organization that is hiding in the remote areas of a failing state, free to use its weapons at will.

We have not yet begun to put our minds to this concept, which I call "threat convergence." It is, in a sense, the fourth major threat after WMD, terrorism, and failing states – the area in which these three main dangers converge. This requires an integrated approach.

Consider the disciplines and funding involved in our security establishments and you will understand how much change will have to occur to respond properly. There are specialists in all three areas of concern, with agencies and budgets addressing them separately. These specialists rarely come together to work collaboratively on understanding the roots of societal decay, the sinews of entrepreneurial networks and the ideological relationships that foster contemporary threats. Like any profession, security analysts tend to operate within their own stovepipes, protect their own turf, defend their own funds, and interact with like-minded colleagues in their field.

We need to mix it up. People who are experts on weak and failing states rarely interact with traditional arms control experts who focus on WMD or with counter-terrorism specialists. Each community of specialists believes it has little to offer the others, and that the others have little to offer them. As a result, we are not nearly as analytically agile, intellectually creative or systematically rigorous as we should be.

This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s, for example, I was working on South Africa. An arms control colleague at a think tank I worked at asked me about whether there was much debate in that country on the issue of nuclear capabilities. There was none. He asked because the apartheid government was suspected of testing a nuclear weapon in the South Atlantic, but the evidence was inconclusive. I said that understanding the motives of the ruling regime had to be taken into account in the assessment because the apartheid government felt it was besieged and that it was the target of a "total onslaught" from the Soviet Union, which was out to get control of the nation's strategic minerals to deny them to the West. Developing WMD would, in the eyes of the regime at that time, have been a "logical" response. Pretoria felt that it was the last bastion of non-communist rule in Africa. It was a twisted notion, but an important insight into the question of whether the government would consider building a nuclear capability. However, no such political analysis was included in the nuclear assessments by the CIA or the DIA at the time. The analyses concluded, incorrectly, that South Africa had not developed WMD. In fact, it had developed

several nuclear weapons that were later destroyed by the outgoing apartheid government. Pretoria had also started research on race-based chemical weapons and sponsored assassinations of anti-apartheid leaders in foreign capitals, acts that would be considered state-sponsored terrorism in today's world.

In large part, the failure to know that South Africa had nuclear weapons was a product of the wide gap in analysis between the arms control specialists and the political specialists. The technical analysis relied solely on signal intelligence for their findings.

In similar fashion, WMD and counter-terrorism specialists today do not interact as much as they should, both with each other and with those who study state failure -- the analysis of societal forces that create the seedbeds of terrorism and foster rogue behavior toward proliferation. Our bureaucratic structures, professional boundaries, and mental horizons must open up to more interagency collaboration, professional interaction among specialists, and more creative intellectual approaches.

There is a modern equivalent of the South Africa example. We don't really know much about whether the Pakistani scientist, A.Q Khan, operated with or without the knowledge and consent of government officials. Among other things, he has not been allowed to be interviewed by independent intelligence officials or diplomats. We have not pushed Pakistan on this because it is an important ally in the fight against terrorism. Despite strong rhetoric about democracy, we hesitate to object when undemocratic moves are made in Pakistan, for fear that we might destabilize a cooperative government. But the truth is that, as important an ally Pakistan is in the war on terrorism, it is in reality a weak, and possibly failing state that possesses WMD and a corps of nuclear scientists who have had deep links to global networks that foster proliferation.

As a weak state, Pakistan has to balance many competing internal forces; it lacks physical control over many parts of its own territory; it does not have a monopoly on the use of force; and its state institutions do not have the capacity to aggressively expose the networks that foster proliferation and corruption, much less serve and protect its population.

Weak and failing states -- as a category of security threats -- is the least understood part of the security threat triad. We really did not start paying sufficient attention to the problem until 9/11. No one had imagined that Afghanistan could be the base from which an enemy could strike America. If it could happen in that war-torn, shattered country, it can happen in virtually any decayed state.

Failure to understand the causes and consequences of state decay constitute one of the biggest shortcomings of security analysts today; yet these shattered states represent the soft underbelly of international security. Thus far, we are dealing with problem mostly through military responses, training local forces, except for the Middle East, where are pressing for democracy. But democracy is not going to be enough. There is no guaranty that the vote will lead to competent institutions, harmonious societies, or western oriented governments. Indeed, the reverse could also be a plausible outcome.

By way of background, my organization -- the Fund for Peace--decided a decade ago that we needed to focus more on the global dangers of failing states and internal wars, and we shifted emphasis accordingly. We have developed a variety of project and programs to address it -- and I invite everyone to go to our website to check out those programs -- but the

one initiative that is most relevant for this audience is our work on early warning and assessment of internal conflict.

Experts estimated that there are 50 to 70 states that may be at risk of “failure,” meaning that about two billion people are living in states that are in danger of internal disorder. In order to deal effectively with these states, policymakers must be able to anticipate and assess the roots of these conflicts, whether mitigating options are available. Policymakers must also be able to monitor the impact of mitigating options so that policies can be changed in they are not working or special circumstances arise.

Combining social science techniques and information technology, the FFP has developed an original methodology, which we call the Conflict Assessment System Tool or CAST. It examines trends in twelve social, economic and military/political indicators (both qualitative and quantitative), measures of those indicators, the “core five” state institutions essential for effective governance, and STINGS (surprises, triggers, idiosyncratic factors, national temperaments and spoilers). We place the conflict on a map that depicts the typical life cycle of a conflict to track the decent or progress of a conflict. (We have also developed the first Failed States Index, published in the July/August issue of Foreign Policy magazine. It is available at www.foreignpolicy.org or www.fundforpeace.org.)

We have worked with several clients, applying CAST for different purposes and at different levels of automation. We have a manual version, a semi-automated version and are working on an advanced version -- a new level of capability in which we are striving to:

- a) improve forecasts of the probability of violence (similar to the way a meteorologist forecasts rain or shine, with probability values),
- b) improve forecasts of the timeframe for violence, and
- c) improve forecasts of the probability of mitigating options having a desired effect in pre- and post-conflict phases of a conflict.

Using sophisticated Boolean and Bayesian techniques, we collect data from open source information, with the only limitation being that the data has to be in electronic format. Eventually, as the digital revolution proceeds, we will be able to tap into blogs kept by people in conflict zones and full-text books, but for now we rely on media sources — both print and broadcast, local, regional and international. The software “reads” up to 11,000 articles a day. It imports, indexes, scans and computes the values of data to produce trend lines over several time periods. This requires considerable programming, mathematical algorithms, and input from country or area experts. It is user-friendly and adaptable to several applications, and we are seeking resources to make an educational version for classroom use.

I cite our own methodology because it is a good example of what we believe to be fresh approaches. Sometimes nonprofits or academics can launch ideas that governments cannot, sometimes they can be more agile and creative, but we all need to work collaboratively.

By doing so, we can go much further. We can identify which of the weak and failing states may be vulnerable to penetration by terrorist organizations, and which among their governments may be seeking acquisition of WMD. Moreover, we can develop new indicators and approaches to focus on non-state actors, support networks, financing, and arms pipelines

– identifying their linkages to particular states or societal groups that are facilitating WMD proliferation or terrorism.

In conclusion, let me reiterate the necessity for analysts to pursue a new agenda – one that integrates the expertise we have into a larger and more holistic understanding of how the post 9/11 world works. Let us build on the existing consensus by pushing the frontiers of research further into an analysis of “threat convergence” – the intersections between WMD proliferation, terrorism and failing states. Had we done this earlier, we might have avoided the situation in which the U.S. Secretary of State needs to press the President of Pakistan for more information from an alleged rogue scientist who is believed to have supplied Iran and Libya with assistance in developing nuclear weapons technologies as far back as 18 years before it was discovered.

We still do not know how many other A.Q. Khan’s there are out there, or how many other nuclear wannabes have benefited from such deadly profiteering, or how many other states might be harboring the likes of Al Queda. The task of finding out lies not only with intelligence officials, it also lies with political and security analysts as a whole. We have only just begun to enter a new security era and we are still learning the ropes. But we should be far more intent on getting better and more accurate analysis in the future if we are to avoid repeating the analytic mistakes of the past.