



European security in 2020: Threats, challenges and responses

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This article looks over the horizon to explore some of the key security threats and challenges that are likely to confront European policy makers over the next dozen years. It provides a sweeping overview of the main actors, regions and issues involved, as well as highlighting the systemic problems we face in our efforts to respond. Concerted multilateral approaches are essential, backed by sustained political willpower over the long term. Unfortunately, even if we are able to achieve this, we could still end up acting too little too late when trying to address the wrong problem in the wrong way.

1. Looking beyond the next election

In order to exercise power, European politicians need to be elected. To be elected, they require the majority support of their electorates – usually expressed every four years or so. This has two main consequences. First, invariably it means that politicians concentrate on trying to satisfy the demands of those who can re-elect them i.e. rising living standards, decent public services, and so on – with national security usually towards the tail end of that list. Second, it means they focus is on the short term – dealing with the ‘here and now’.

But politicians are also aware that security is an issue that can swiftly ascend the popular agenda. Crises can erupt seemingly from nowhere. There are a multitude of threats and challenges out there to which European political leaders have to be ready to respond with alacrity and good judgment. How much easier it would be if they were able to look over the horizon, see things coming and prepare accordingly. This article - which draws largely on discussions at a recent security conference¹ - attempts to set out what some of those challenges might be over the next decade or so.

2. Key actors and regions

2.1 United States

As the world’s largest economy splutters into recession, are we already witnessing a gradual decline in US power that will continue? Despite its unparalleled military might, the Bush Administration has floundered in pursuit of its strategic objectives: mired in Iraq and Afghanistan, outmaneuvered in a diplomatic battle with Iran, and obliged to negotiate with - now nuclear-armed - North Korea.

Classical deterrence is becoming increasingly irrelevant for dealing with new and emerging threats and there are signs that the US is beginning to re-embrace the importance of forging multilateral

¹ European Security in 2020: External Threats and Internal Response, 896th Wilton Park Conference, 31 January – 3 February, organised by Wilton Park (Executive Agency of UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office) in partnership with the EU Institute for Security Studies. All discussions were conducted strictly under Chatham House Rules. Details of the programme can be found at: <http://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/themes/defence/pastconference.aspx?confref=WP896>

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partnerships to achieve its goals. It is in Europe’s interest that the new US President keeps America engaged in helping to address global security challenges in the years ahead.

2.2 Middle East

In the Arab world, where most regimes remain resistant to political reform, there is likely to be heightened tension and more destabilization. One of the causes will be demographic pressures arising from the vast population growth forecast for the Middle East that will require the creation of many new jobs. Yet, there is no entrepreneurial spirit in the region that might help to generate the necessary growth, or economic structure for enabling it to flourish.

Water will become an even more precious resource in the years to come - especially as populations increase - and can be expected to become the source of new regional aggravation. For instance, the Lebanese have long accused Israel of having designs on the waters of the River Litani, and Syria accuses it of being reluctant to withdraw from the banks of the Sea of Galilee, the source of up to 30 per cent of Israel's water.²

A Western policy of propping up tired undemocratic regimes is not the answer as this fuels further resentment and is likely to strengthen the appeal of the extremists. As ever, significant advancement of the Middle East Peace Process remains crucial, but political reforms *throughout* the Arab world are also essential if we are to build a last and just settlement for the region.

2.3 Russia

Stung by heavy-handed US diplomacy and a perception of having been humiliated by the West too often, Russia under President Putin is becoming increasingly confrontational. Clearly, the prospect of NATO’s eastward expansion is annoying Russia, along with the possible US missile defence deployments in Eastern Europe, and Putin is now referring to the start of a new arms race. Domestically, he has demonstrated a worrying authoritarianism; competition for power has been eliminated and corruption is rife³. Economically, Russia is an important energy player - possessing 8 per cent of the world’s oil reserves and 30 per cent of its gas.

This all means that Europe needs to re-address its strategic relationship with Russia. In doing so it should bear in mind that Russia’s engagement is important in finding sustainable solutions to some key European security concerns - in Kosovo and Iran, for instance. There are also things that Russia wants, for example, admission to the World Trade Organization. We may not be returning to a Cold War with Russia but we should be trying to avoid slipping into an extended Cold Peace.

2.4 China

The growing economic and political power of China looms over any discourse about future global security. Yet no-one is really sure what China wants: possibly because China itself is unsure. It is important in trying to understand China’s future to first appreciate that it is essentially an artificial entity: nothing like it existed before 1949. It is a highly fragmented, intrinsically unstable country.

Although remaining politically ideological, since 1978 China has changed economic track through encouraging massive foreign investment. Yet this has delivered something fundamentally flawed and unsustainable. Around 88 per cent of its high-tech exports are made by foreign companies based inside China, and 60 per cent of investment goes into manufacturing - often simply involving the finishing of products for re-export. Whereas the coastal economy is booming, inland the country remains largely impoverished. Deriving 70 per cent of its energy from small coal mines, China is hugely energy inefficient and the internal regions customarily ignore centralized diktats on environment and energy improvements. If it continues along its present growth path, unless its

² BBC News website at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in_depth/world/2000/world_water_crisis/default.stm

³ Martin Wolf, ‘Why Putin’s rule threatens both Russia and the west’, *Financial Times*, 13 February 2008.

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distinctive economic model implodes, China will use up all of the world’s resources by 2032.
Either way, Western policy makers would be confronted with enormous repercussions.

2.5 Africa

Although European and US investors are returning to Africa, they now have new competition. China is pouring money into Africa to secure the energy and minerals for its rapidly growing economy. And because China does not attach the same conditionality to its aid packages as does the EU, some African countries may find these increasingly attractive.

Today’s conflicts on the Continent are driven more by warlords trying to control resources than by political conflicts over who controls a state. On the positive side, there are signs that the African Union is taking seriously its responsibilities to develop an African Peace and Security Architecture, with the assistance of the EU. In the decade to come, an important and wider effort needs to be devoted to the building of civil society in general, through the establishment of think-tanks, the development of an independent media and the creation of new higher educational establishments.

3. Energy

Global energy requirements will be 50 per cent higher in 2030 than they are now. The requisite increase in global food production cannot physically be delivered. Consequently, food prices - that have already risen dramatically in recent years - will continue to do so. As mentioned previously, there will be shortages of fresh water with more people around to drink it. This will require the West to pay more attention to where the vulnerabilities of its vital resource supply chains lie.

There is no immediate shortage of oil underground: the problem lies in a failure of necessary investment to extract it and the relative cost of doing so. As the price of oil rises due to declining supply and increased demand, poorer nations will no longer be able to afford it. Inflationary problems for the global economy are also likely.

Unlike oil, there is no world market for gas. Instead, gas is traded according to bilateral deals. By 2020, two-thirds of European gas demand will be imported from outside the OECD or EU. As the demand for gas rises and European production falls, how will Europe fill the gap? Russia is an unpredictable partner and, in any event, wants to prioritise the energy needs of its own citizens (Russia consumes three times as much gas per capita as the EU). After Russia, Iran is sitting on the second highest gas reserves in the world. Given the political unreliability of both countries, the EU will want to reduce its reliance on these sources, perhaps by moving towards the Central Asian republics – where new energy streams will open up after 2013.

4. Aid to failed states

Some estimates suggest that there are 40-60 failed states i.e. they cannot perform the basic functions of government. These act as a source of instability within the international system. Yet, the impossibility of intervening militarily in every case leads the international community to rely on economic assistance to try and repair the situation. Unfortunately, the reality of their failed status prevents the international financial institutions – the World Bank and International Monetary Fund - from delivering effective financial assistance to these states. Moreover, the multitude of humanitarian aid organizations who invariably get involved often results in a lack of coordinated action - too many plans from too many actors.

Indeed, international aid programmes can actually damage a country’s indigenous ability to lift itself out of failure. For instance, in Afghanistan 60-70 per cent of public servants have been sucked

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into the aid programmes of external actors. It needs to be recognized that aid can be a driver of resentment and inequity as well as assistance: for example, through handing out procurement contracts and licensing arrangements to narrow elites. Nor is there often proper accounting for, and auditing of, aid programmes. This has led to accusation of the creation of an ‘Aid Industrial Complex’ – with powerful self-sustaining drivers and objectives of its own, which may be disconnected from the actual needs of the recipient country.

The alternative is to enable greater local stakeholder inputs, the promotion of higher education, and the establishment of national accountability systems – where the ‘bottom up’ approach is crucial. The question as to whether all states are culturally capable and/or willing to accept the values of liberal market economics must be faced; especially those that essentially are ‘honour-based’ societies.

5. Terrorism

Obviously, countering fundamentalist terrorism successfully requires a united and coordinated European response. Here, it is important to focus on what these terrorists want, rather than what they do – otherwise one is drawn into arguments over the moral equivalence of innocent deaths caused by each side.

The West should stand fast and refuse to negotiate with those whose *raison d’être* is the antithesis of Western democratic values and beliefs. At the same time it must do more to address the genuine grievances of the terrorists’ potential support base. Western intelligence agencies need to improve the pooling of their strategic intelligence, and more pro-active public diplomacy is required to promote the West’s own message in the global media and to rebut that of the Al-Qaeda ‘spin doctors’.

It is unlikely that these terrorists will be completely defeated by 2020, and there are bound to be more atrocities to come. But with a carefully honed and coherently applied series of policies, we may be able to reduce the terrorists’ strategic significance to a more tolerable level.

6. WMD

A great deal of attention has focused on how best to prevent terrorists achieving the means to deliver weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – and rightly so. Fortunately, the obstacles to their acquisition of nuclear weapons – the only true weapon of mass *destruction* – remain relatively high. The same is not so true for chemical, biological and radiological weapons, however, and it is realistic to expect there to be some form of WMD attack launched by non-state actors before 2020. International preventive responses need to concentrate not only on strengthening controls over relevant materials, but also on widening awareness throughout society of the potential for nefarious applications of chemicals, biotechnology, and radioactive substances.

At the strategic level, the six-party talks over North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme may achieve successful denuclearization of that country by 2020, but it would be brave prediction. Iran may already be defined as ‘nuclear-capable’ – but perhaps it can still be persuaded at least to restrict its enrichment capability and not to weaponise.

There is always a risk that a nuclear weapon might actually be used – whether deliberately or accidentally - over the next dozen years. The consequences of such a calamity are impossible to predict without defining the circumstances. It might spur the major powers towards disarmament or it could persuade others that nuclear weapons are the only means of ensuring national security.

Either an Iranian Bomb or the use of a nuclear weapon, and the likely resulting regional and global proliferation repercussions, might prove fatal to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to the extent that it does not survive to reach its tenth Review Conference in 2020.

7. Problems in making policy

One of the main challenges we face is trying to ensure there is proper long-term analysis built into planning processes. The various cycles involved - electoral, budgetary, procurement etc. - do not neatly match evolving threat cycles. For the reasons mentioned at the start, it is difficult to force longer-term planning onto politicians' agendas. Indeed, often the only way to get support for a new policy is to link it to solving an immediate problem.

European policy makers are constantly attempting to achieve more outputs from limited resources; prioritising from amongst a multitude of competing demands, while taking into account a range of disparate considerations. They need to be able to analyse correctly the information they receive, process it efficiently, and adapt policy accordingly. But they may struggle to achieve any of these things. Setting benchmarks and measuring effectiveness is rarely easy. What is more important than what? It is little surprise that decision-making stasis can result – especially when 27 Member States are trying to reach a consensual decision. And when a decision is finally reached, this is sometimes seen as the end of the process rather than its beginning: without an accompanying implementation plan nothing actually happens.

8. Response strategies

Constructing strategies is the means by which states and alliances attempt to set out their longer-term policy objectives. Over the next couple of years a plethora of new ones and revisions of existing ones is expected. The UK is about to publish its first National Security Strategy. France is expected to publish a White Paper on Defence and National Security in the spring in time for France's EU Presidency. Javier Solana has been charged with re-examining the 2003 European Security Strategy, with a view to recommending revisions by the end of 2008. NATO is developing a new Strategic Concept that it will unveil in 2009. The new US President, who will assume office in early 2009, will surely commission a new US Security Strategy to replace the 2006 iteration of his predecessor.

The question is whether all of these strategies are sufficiently in harmony to enable a coherent, coordinated, multilateral western security response to forthcoming threats and challenges? Inevitably, each strategy will reflect the national or institutional priorities of its author but they should all be striving to achieve a degree of synergy. Unless, all Western partners are working towards approximately the same common ends, their individual efforts will be diminished. Even then, we could still end up acting too little too late when trying to address the wrong problem in the wrong way.

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