

# Changing dynamics

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F. Andy Messing and William Shingleton

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After the Gulf war, the Center for Defense Information (CDI) issued a report titled "World at War 1992: Fewer Wars-No Danger to the United States." CDI claimed wars would decline in the 1990s. The book "Megatrends 2000" echoed these same findings declaring "it has begun to dawn on people everywhere that war is now an obsolete way of solving problems." Sadly, both analyses were written based on flawed agendas that the authors wanted to promote.

Unsurprisingly, the intervening years have not been kind to their views. World Conflict Report in 2000, published by the National Defense Council Foundation (NDCF), found that out of 193 countries in the world, 68 had violent conflict that year. The total number of conflicts has continually risen since the demise of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the collapse of the US-Soviet rivalry was only part of the story regarding massive changes throughout the globe. It appears that the Clinton administration's years of patchwork foreign policy gave rise to the increase in ethnic, religious, territorial and resource wars. . . among other factors. The failure to address these trends correctly is the reason conflict continues to plague so many countries.

NDCF's just-released study demonstrates how security, political and socioeconomic factors interact to cause conflict. As an example, countries are more prone to turmoil if the military is not under civilian control, if small arms are readily available, if the economy is corrupt, if religious persecution is rampant and if the government cannot provide basic social services, particularly health and education. More often than not, these problems compound one another. Indonesia is a quintessential example. The Indonesian military generated conflict by forming militias that undermined the authority of the civilian government. The Suharto regime allowed criminal or "dark-side" capitalists throughout the economy, thus choking growth. In part, thanks to the military, small arms were readily available to militants. Then, religious persecution rose, generating separatist movements. Finally, the Indonesian government struggled to provide clean water, health care and a host of other organizational and social services. As a result of all these sample factors, the Indonesian people have little stake in their government, fueling their desire to confront it.

Indonesia is hardly unique. In varying forms, all four types of litmus issues are driving conflict from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. However, not only is the level of conflict rising, but the type is changing. World Conflict Report in 2000 classified 70 percent of conflicts as "low-intensity." This means these conflicts are being fought primarily with small arms and using guerrilla or terrorist tactics. Therefore, 80 percent of conflicts in 2000 were civil in nature; in other words, they were essentially contests between domestic actors.

The changing face of wars poses new risks to the United States. Like everything else, conflict has become trans-national. For example, the USS Cole was blown up in Yemen by terrorists directed allegedly by a Saudi exile in Afghanistan. Furthermore, in a world where weapons of mass destruction are more available than ever before, terrorists' flexibility and lethality is mounting exponentially. Literally a handful of these international criminals can negatively distort or destroy tens of millions of lives in a cascading manner.

Now, resource depletion and population growth point to a dynamic expansion of these smaller tumultuous imbroglios. A current intelligence estimate stated that the current world population of 6 billion people will grow by another billion in the next 15 years. Unfortunately, the fastest-growing states are generally poorly governed and ill-equipped to deal with the increasing demands from their populations. This will threaten America as our citizens abroad are jeopardized, our market places and resource bases are constricted and trade routes are threatened.

Issues like good governance, access to health and education and just clean water drive many conflicts. American aid and assistance efforts need to be tailored to deal with these catalytic problems. In the early to mid-1990s, the west threw tens of billions of dollars of aid to Russia with virtually no controls. The result was that U.S. aid fed corrupt elements promoting criminal "dark-side" capitalism, thereby destroying meaningful reform and boosting many anti-Western elements. Such failures in the future environment will only make matters worse. Therefore, enhanced accountability and conveying ethics must be a cornerstone of American policy to prevent this.

At the same time, military spending needs to be smarter. Now, President Bush's team is wisely stepping back to review defense expenditures and structure. They will probably find that the solution is not simply more military spending across the board, but a customized approach that encompasses all of the factors outlined above. Defense is not simply gizmos and massive amounts of personnel. Predominately big-ticket defense items may not help in a world dominated by small wars, civil conflicts and deadly proliferation. Instead, America must design its military spending to focus on enough units equipped and trained to prevail in unusual terrain, varied cultures and uncertain circumstances, from space and sea to jungles and sand. They must be intimate with the "closed fist" of destroying and the "open hand" of building. Importantly, our leaders must know when and how to use both.

Over the last eight years in particular, America viscerally reacted before understanding the problems and making the ensuing correct estimates of the situations. On occasion, and doubling our mistakes, our actions were not taking into account our own interests. The results were botched and incomplete interventions in Somalia, Haiti and a deteriorating mission in Bosnia and Kosovo. To not think before America acts, is to blunder through an increasingly dangerous world.

*F. Andy Messing is Executive Director, National Defense Council Foundation. William Shingleton is a Senior Research Assistant at the National Defense Council Foundation.*