

Summary: In this brief, the author underlines the specificity of the contemporary global security environment, and highlights how the unique volume and complexity of current and emerging security threats, and their interrelationships, create daunting challenges for the transatlantic partnership.

Today's Strategic Environment: Inflection Point or Déjà Vu?

by *Julianne Smith*

In light of the sheer volume and complexity of current and emerging security threats, a new debate has erupted across the Atlantic. Does the West currently find itself operating in an era that differs so significantly from either the post-Cold War era or the post-9/11 period that it requires new approaches and tools? Or is today's security environment better characterized as different but not exactly new? The answer rests somewhere in between. While the threat of terrorism stemming from the so-called Islamic State or Chinese acts of aggression in the South China Sea are not altogether unfamiliar challenges, this particular snapshot in time does possess certain attributes that do indeed set it apart from past moments in our collective history. Bruce Jones of the Brookings Institution does an excellent job of highlighting many of those attributes in his accompanying essay¹ but one could add three more: the growing diversity of actors and adversaries; the asymmetric capabilities and tactics used by our adversaries; and the eroding foundation of the post-World War II Era.

For decades during the Cold War, the West was largely focused on threats stemming from nation states. As we moved through the 1990s and into the post-9/11 era, capitals across Europe and North America turned their attention to rogue regimes in North Korea and Iran and a long list of transnational threats ranging from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to terrorism. Today, transatlantic policymakers not only find themselves continuing to address that same list of threats, they also find themselves returning to great power politics, which at least some analysts had assumed had been swept into the dustbin of history. Russia's annexation of Ukraine in 2014 is just one example; China's brinkmanship in the South China Sea is another.

At the same time, the array of non-state actors that European and U.S. policymakers now need to monitor is growing, thanks in no small part to the diffusion of disruptive technology. That list of non-state actors includes not only insurgents and criminal groups but also corporations and super-empowered individuals, such as Edward Snowden. And none of those groups operate in isolation, creating an interconnected web across economic and political lines for which traditional policy solutions are ill

¹ Bruce Jones, What Strategic Environment does the Transatlantic Community Confront, GMF Policy Brief, January 2015, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/what-strategic-environment-does-transatlantic-community-confront>

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suited. With such a rich assortment of actors to address, policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic often struggle to maintain strategic attention and focus on anything other than short-term responses. My colleague, Jacob Stokes, and I — in a piece we wrote last year for the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) — have characterized this era as one of “compounding complexity,” where the national security challenges for Western policymakers grow exponentially rather than by simple addition.²

In addition to the wide array of adversaries and actors to which European and U.S. governments must respond, policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic are encountering a dizzying collection of asymmetric capabilities. Where conflicts once centered around conventional military capabilities, our adversaries have become savvy users of hybrid warfare and new technology in attempts to exploit our weaknesses, deter us from acting, and erode U.S. and European efforts to project power. From cyber-attacks on U.S. corporations like Sony to the use of carefully calibrated strategic messaging by the Russians to the anti-satellite weapons being developed by countries like China, policymakers in the West face constant pressure to find new and creative ways to respond to disruptive technologies and asymmetric tactics.

Developing innovative policy responses and capabilities has been challenging, though, for a number of reasons. First, most countries in the West face resource constraints, limiting new investments in capabilities that can counter and outsmart those of our adversaries. Second, it is not always clear where the innovation should reside as multiple government agencies are often working in unison. In seeking innovative ways to deal with homegrown extremists, for example, should nations allocate resources to law enforcement, the military, or the intelligence community? Third, the West maintains an unwavering commitment to international law and international norms, which can create disadvantages when battling a non-state actor that has complete disregard for the international system and largely accepted rules of engagement. Finally, the West’s determination to adhere to international law can also present problems when the laws to date are vague or non-existent. This has become perhaps most challenging in regards to technology or cyberspace. For example, the use of drones or unmanned aerial vehicles remains uncharted territory when it comes to international norms.

² http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_Strategy%26Statecraft_SmithStokes.pdf

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Another unique challenge for U.S. and European policymakers in today’s national security environment is the weakening of the liberal order. The United States and Europe spent the better part of the last 70 years designing, building, and reforming an array of international organizations that have served as the bedrock of the international system. These institutions succeeded in establishing a rules-based approach to everything from territorial sovereignty to interstate conflict to global trade. But as the United States and Europe have come to share the global stage with a number of emerging powers, that system has come into question, with some countries actively working inside international organizations to erode the existing framework. Others are simply looking to replace today’s institutions with new ones that might align more closely with emerging powers’ “values” (see China’s efforts to create a new “World Bank” for Asia). The very foundation of the international order, therefore, is eroding and uncertainty remains about the degree to which global consensus on multiple issues can actually be achieved.

In light of these three challenges — the growing diversity of actors, the array of asymmetric capabilities and tactics, and the eroding foundation of the liberal order — as well as others outlined in the CNAS report mentioned earlier in this piece, it should be of no surprise that Europe and the United States are in dire need of new approaches and

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policies to cope with this era of compounding complexity. But our collective starting point should be a new political strategy that adequately captures today's complex security environment and outlines clear aims in light of both short- and long-term threats and lessons of the past. Too often European and U.S. policymakers find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of reactive policies that continue to rely largely on outdated solution sets. If the two sides of the Atlantic wish to break out of that cycle, they will need to challenge existing institutions and forums like the EU-U.S. relationship and NATO to launch a dialogue that can help them pair a wider political strategy with real resources that could, in turn, produce new innovative policy tools.

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About the Author

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