

# Transformative Global Strategic Trends

## *Their Impact on National Security in the Coming Decades*

By

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The world is undergoing a geopolitical restructuring and human transition on a scale which has not been seen for perhaps a thousand years. This in turn generates what appear to be unrecognizable social, technological, and geostrategic situations, resulting in policy confusion in most societies.

The result is an appearance of chaos, or at least confusion, in which there is a tendency to deal solely with, and react to, the flames of immediate challenges. These challenges, because of the novelty of the situation, are perceived as crises rather than opportunities. Most societies, then, see themselves as facing an array of seemingly urgent threats. Apparent confusion and short-term focus prevent leaders and analysts from seeing the larger strategic terrain, and from laying out a perspective which identifies and prioritizes challenges and opportunities in a coherent fashion.

The seemingly urgent threats, indeed, so obsess us that we do not address that strategically-important global terrain. The general societal *de-emphasis* on history, replaced by an *emphasis* on technology and tangible, short-term reward, reduces social horizons to the point where, despite today's supposed "globalization", most societies are already in a very small, dark, and restricted world of thought.

How, then, can we understand the drivers of our national security perceptions and actions? And how can we understand what *drives the drivers* of those threats or trends and what *will* drive them over the coming decades?

And because we find ourselves *not* looking at the broad horizons, most political leaders, and most national security organizations in the world today, are preoccupied with *reacting* to the phenomenon of terrorism, or other forms of proxy warfare which are often incorrectly being labeled as terrorism. It is necessary to stress, *à priori*, that reaction is not a war-winning strategy or a strategy for national or global leadership. This is even more the case when most of the combatant societies — including the so-called terrorists themselves — are unaware of the nature and *real* goals or real drivers of the wars in which they are engaged.

Moreover, the massive and clumsy global reaction to, and preoccupation with, terrorism has meant that what is vitally important — the geostrategic transformation of the entire world — is occurring beneath the surface of consciousness, without real consideration or analysis. It is this underlying transformation which will determine the fate of civilizations and societies. But because the changes move the world into a new and uncharted realm, this process heightens economic and military uncertainty and therefore heightens the need to act carefully. This uncertainty and caution is fueling the proxy strategic wars which involve so-called terrorism, insurgency, and irregular warfare. This process also disguises the breakdown in the way in which warfare *technology*, and (more gradually) warfare *doctrine*, themselves are transforming.

We place great emphasis on technology as the savior of both military and economic advantage, but we may not be developing technologies appropriate to the dramatically

transforming global environment. In any event, the pace of technological development may already be slowing overall.<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime, we are largely mired — and wired — into reactive mode. And the process of *reaction*, as we see, diverts societies and governments from articulating and pursuing their own goals through planned *action*. Reaction robs a society of initiative and control over its own destiny. And in the case of proxy warfare, the reaction is against *the symptomatic cause of pain*, or the supposed cause of fear, rather than addressing the origins of it.

Terrorism itself is a form of psychological warfare, and is designed to divert and paralyze the decisionmaking and priorities of target audiences. This, on a protracted basis and if left uncorrected, can cause a substantial impact on the strategic direction and capabilities of the target society. Successful psychological operations or information dominance (ID) campaigns cause a target society either to move in the wrong direction, act in some instances against its own self-interests, or merely, through paralysis, allow an opening of strategic opportunity to others, particularly the sponsors and sustainers of the terrorist imagery. The processes of terrorism and proxy warfare — and the psychological diversion or paralysis — are the physical elements (which used to be called “agitprop”: agitation propaganda) in the overall quest for information dominance (ID). And ID, in psychological and physical terms, is the premier conflict, or international competition, methodology of the coming decades.

It becomes clear when we step back: we can see that there is a scale and order to the way human society historically determines its geopolitical structuring.

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<sup>1</sup> Andre Geim, who won the 2010 Nobel Prize for Physics, said in an article in *The Financial Times* on February 6, 2013: “We are in the midst of a technology crisis. Disruptive technologies now appear less frequently than steady economic growth requires.”

Right now, the world is in transition, a disruptive process which inevitably leads to fluctuating episodes of excessive caution, excessive opportunism, and confusion at governmental levels. We can talk in a moment about the causes of this period of transformation. But right now we see that historical lessons about coping with the cratometamorphosis — the restructuring of entire societies — are lost in a blur. Governments tend to cling to known or existing capabilities and resources — legacy systems and doctrine — even if these systems and doctrines are poorly suited to new tasks. However, by taking a step back to achieve perspective, we can see that there is a natural hierarchy to the global frameworks. The long-term grand strategic visions and a durable terrain are at the top: this is the global, holistic view of where mankind and the planet can be seen historically and into the future. Beneath this are the theater strategic perspectives and the individual winds of the trends of technology, economics, and social functions. Beneath this, in the hierarchical framework, are the tactical environments which are short-term and immediate. It is vital that we have policies and plans in place at each strategic level.

It follows, then, that regional strategic dynamics are subordinate to, and often caused by, greater global trends, even though we, as humans, tend to focus on, and react to, the issues which we feel immediately threaten or benefit us.

So where are we today? What are the essential trends, visible now, which determine long-term outcomes?

Periods of transition between “rising powers” and “declining powers” have been described in terms of the so-called Thucydides Trap, when fear within a static or declining power (historically, Athens) of a rising power (historically, Sparta) makes war seemingly inevitable. The phenomenon today applies not only to the China (PRC)-US dynamic — as

has been widely remarked — but to the Middle Eastern imbalance, the “north-south” imbalance, and so on.

Accompanying this *sliding vertical scale* of strategic power balance is the *sliding horizontal scale* of population volatility and movement, characterized by the breakdown of the Westphalian nation-state concept; by so-called globalization; by urbanization and hysteria-driven migration; and by the peaking and imminent troughing of global population numbers. Thus do we reach the four-dimensional chess game.

We now visibly see the prospect of a major power check-mate — from the Persian *shah mat*: the king is dead, or helpless — in the present global game. Of course we also see, then, the prospect, or nature’s necessity, for a “new game”; a new king.

It should not be surprising that these longer-duration mega-trends ultimately drive and dominate shorter-duration regional or mono-cultural trends, although the direct influence may not be immediately perceivable. Absent any long-term clarity, we focus on immediate threats; we react unconsciously to, rather than see, the broader, longer strategic terrain.

Right now, much of the world concerns itself with the perceived threat of terrorism as the specter which dominates the question of the survival of Western civilization, or is the precursor to Islam’s “End of Battles”. However, it is worth recognizing the reality that ***no terrorist phenomenon has ever sustained itself for any meaningful duration — or achieved strategic outcomes — in the absence of support from a nation-state or wealthy society.***

Does anyone, after introspection, believe that the current phenomenon of “Islamist terrorism”, including its metamorphosis into territory-holding entities such as the “Islamic State” or (briefly) *Boko Haram*, has not been without major state support since before even

the *al-Qaida* movement? Does anyone believe that the leftist terrorism of the mid-Cold War period was not supported by state sponsors, ranging from the USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and their allies? Does anyone believe that the Irish terrorism of that same period was not also supported by states or societal bodies (including transnational criminal organizations)?

If we acknowledge that the cycles of terrorism, insurgency, and proxy warfare generally are driven by the discreet support of governments or societies, then we also have to question whether most of those sponsors have calculated — or are even in a position to calculate — the second- and third-order consequences of their actions. In other words, do most governments which sponsor such actions recognize the long-term impact of what they have done or are doing?

Is Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, or even the US, cognizant of the longer-term impact of their various levels and timings of sponsorship of Sunni *jihadist* groups over many decades? The world is, after all, still living with the effects of the sponsorship of radical leftism which was designed and sponsored in the post-World War II era of Cold War as a proxy movement to oppose Western, free-market industrial efficiencies. It is inevitable, then, that we are starting to see some of the Wahhabist- or Muslim Brotherhood-origin *jihadism* or radicalism — supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the US (and even Iran) — now coming back to bite the original sponsors.

These sponsorships of proxy movements — civil society movements as well as armed movements — are often seen as expedient ways of opposing rival states without apparent consequences because the sponsorship is perceived as having plausible deniability. From a reactive standpoint, target societies need to understand the sponsorship origins of, or sustenance of, the threat, and how to deal with that form of information dominance warfare.

The sponsor or financier of the terrorist or insurgency threat is the driver of the threat. Deal with that sponsorship and the symptomatic threat diminishes. But then we need to know also what drives the driver. We will get to that shortly.

Today, there is an entire industry in the security sphere which has as its rice-bowl the study and parsing of Islamist ideology and sectarian differences. There was an earlier industry, during the Cold War, which had as *its* rice-bowl the study and parsing of marxist ideology and schismatic differences. The sectarian and schismatic differences *do* have strategic importance, but not because of the differences themselves, or the dialectic in which each social group engages, but because — as social groups — they represent the *temporary modes of social cohesion* which enable populations to exist and manage their affairs in their geographic spaces and environments. This is as much a part of the survival logic — because it creates a political hierarchy — as the *terroir* dictate of crop rotation.

In other words, ideologies (even ill-conceived ideologies) can keep societies intact because of the power of political correctness to achieve rigid and xenophobic adherence to national or social lines. Here I would refer you to the great writers Elias Canetti, who wrote *Crowds and Power*<sup>2</sup>; and Gustave Le Bon, who wrote *The Crowd*<sup>3</sup>.

Now, and for the foreseeable couple of decades, the “Thucydides Trap” means that the world is not only in a period of potentially changing its power balance, or “correlation of forces”; it is in a period of dark uncertainty at very many levels, from global to regional to societal. That means, essentially, that *most powers are presently weak*, and therefore are cautious about behaving in a precipitous manner. Or they perceive that there is opportunity (or the imperative to act) because of the weakness of others.

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<sup>2</sup> Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power*. First English translation 1962. New York: Continuum Publishers, 575 Lexington Ave., NY, NY 10022.

<sup>3</sup> Le Bon, Gustave: *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Paris, 1895.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, what we are seeing is an emerging *balance of weaknesses*, a balance of relatively weak powers (and that includes the People’s Republic of China and the United States), which each act with only relative degrees of boldness, when they see an advantage.

This, in turn, means that sovereign governments will continue, perhaps increasingly during this era of transition, to use proxy forces, such as terrorist groups, as their primary forces to achieve strategic outcomes. In some respects, the desired strategic outcome is merely to achieve paralysis or stalemate in a geopolitical arena. But *in almost every instance the guiding hand of such policy is power politics, rather than ideology or theology.*

We can — and often do — spend vast amounts of our attention analyzing religious or ideological trends rather than looking at the underlying geopolitics. This is presently the case in the terrorist/insurgency jungles of the Middle East and Central Asia. The main problem is that we listen to what the operational protagonists — the “willing idiots”, as Lenin would describe them — say and believe, and spend insufficient time analyzing the core motives of their deep sponsors.

Again: Ideology and theology are carrier waves, not the message.

Do theology or ideology motivate “willing idiots”? And do the “willing idiots” have real grounds for the desperation which motivates their willingness to undertake terrorist or insurgent warfare actions? Without doubt. But to deal primarily with the carrier wave aspect is to be reactive and tactical; not strategic and in control of events.

Who prospers in this “greater Thucydides Trap”? Those who prosper are the ones who understand and value core geopolitical principles, including national and civilizational identities; those who preserve strategic self-sufficiency. Those who gain in this “greater

Thucydides Trap” do what they must for the decades ahead, not merely what is comfortable for the present.

Which brings us back to the question as to what are the overarching global trends — the drivers which drive the policies of proxy warfare — which dictate this realignment of the global power structure over the coming decades? There are several which bear consideration:

**Firstly, global population trends.** We are already seeing that global population rise is reaching its apogee, and we are likely to see, within the coming decade or two, the start of a precipitous decline in human numbers. The decline will be — as we are already seeing — erratic and will vary in speed and intensity according to region. But overall, falling population levels are already being seen first in industrialized economies, and this has begun to have an impact on economic performance, productivity levels, and on commitments to research and development. I discussed this in detail in a book in 2012, entitled *UnCivilization: Urban Geopolitics in a Time of Chaos*<sup>4</sup>. This population decline trend is already beginning to interact with a number of other, related trends, particularly urbanization, trans-national migration, globalization, and the transformation of the concept of “democracy”.

**Secondly, then, the transformative impact of urbanization** and the counterpart globalization of power. The decline in the power of Western civilizational and “democracy” models to react in the interests of the Westphalian states has now become profound. There are many aspects with regard to the impact of urbanization, but principal among these is the

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<sup>4</sup> Copley, Gregory R.: *UnCivilization: Urban Geopolitics in a Time of Chaos*. Alexandria, Virginia, 2012: The International Strategic Studies Association.

fact that the dominance of urban societies removes strategic balance from most Westphalian nation states. This is a phenomenon which is examined in the book, *UnCivilization*.

Without getting into all the details, it is essential to understand that a weakened commitment to the Westphalian balanced urban/rural nation-state concept means that societies become vulnerable because they lose not only national identity but they also lose control over the elements which are the hallmarks of self-sustaining communities. We saw in the era of the Hellenic city-states, and the medieval Italian city-states, just how vulnerable urban societies make themselves to external power forces. The phenomenon of urbanization couples well with the perception of globalization, because urban societies feel that they understand and identify with each other to a far greater degree than they identify with their own immediate hinterlands, which have historically been the key to their survival, through food production and mineral and energy resources. It is urbanization which makes cyber warfare and ID general, and water issues, the core battlefields of the near future.

What we see, in essence, are massive, global trends of population decline emerging in a very uneven process. This is coupled with massive lateral population movement, both from rural to city, and from state to state, with the movement largely being inspired by economic incentives as well as from political unrest. All of this transforms economic conditions at the same time as the foundations of national unity are shaken because — as we discussed — urbanization and globalization have weakened the concepts of national identity and the Westphalian state. These are all components of unrest, and, of course, shake the foundations of currencies and therefore economic planning and capabilities.

The net result is that the future becomes very unclear, and the viability of existing forms of national security protection become questionable, even as technology keeps appearing to

offer new opportunities. The tendency from existing national security and governance authorities is to strengthen existing capabilities along known lines. However, the primary line of defense has to be in strengthening the national identity of each society so that it protects the basic elements of national survival, including self-reliance in economic and survival terms.

It is exactly this reversion to nationalism which is resisted by “modern, democratic societies” which see nationalism as the source of past wars. In reality, it is anti-nationalism which is the source of future collapse.

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He has received a significant number of orders and decorations from governments, including, in 2007, being made a Member of the Order of Australia for his contributions to the international community in the field of strategic analysis. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society in 2011.

Mr Copley also has had an extensive career as an industrialist, owning several shipyards and engineering companies in the United Kingdom, a naval architectural firm, and a chemical company in France. Among his other activities, he is presently chairman of Argonaut LLC, a company exploring — and delivering — remote area, mobile energy and water purification solutions. He served as Vice-Chairman of the Scottish national airline, Highland Express.

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