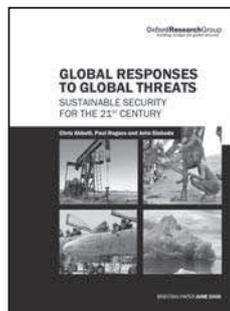


Moving beyond terrorism in the security debate



John Sloboda argues that our governments' obsession with terrorism is stopping us from tackling the underlying causes of global insecurity.

David Attenborough recently joined the growing roll of public figures asserting that climate change is the major challenge facing the world. His motivation is clear: "I don't want ... to look at my grandchildren and hear them say, 'Grandfather, you knew it was happening – and you did nothing'."

Preserving the planet for our children and grandchildren speaks to our deepest aspirations, no matter what culture, religion, or ideology. The entire global political system has been fruitlessly distracted for nearly half a decade by 9/11 and its consequences. Not only does the US-led 'War on Terror' fail to address the real threats facing humanity – the conduct of that 'war' is exacerbating these very threats, and bringing them closer.

This is the stark conclusion of a recent report from Oxford Research Group¹, which identifies four main threats to security in the next century and outlines a plan of action. The four threats are: climate change; competition over resources; marginalisation of the 'majority world'; and global militarisation. If these growing threats are not halted within the next few years, we could pass a tipping point which would catapult the world into a period of intense conflict.

Climate change will cause rising ocean levels, placing migratory pressures on millions of the world's most vulnerable people living on coastal and river delta areas. It will also alter rainfall patterns, particularly over the tropics, creating drought and food shortages.

The world's oil reserves are running out, and there are severe water shortages in many parts of the world. Yet the major powers act as if these resources are unlimited: aggressively competing for their control and expanding their consumption, rather than seeking alternatives. Nuclear power is promoted as a key solution, rather than seen as a security risk, especially in terms of weapons proliferation.

Disparities of wealth and power are growing deeper, both within countries and between different regions

of the world. This fuels the discontent and marginalisation which feeds political violence. Yet current trade and aid arrangements do little to address global economic inequities.

Far from 'keeping the peace', the unceasing growth in global military expenditure is stoking new conflicts. New weapons, such as 'mini-nukes', are destabilising current arms control regimes, and place more deadly capabilities within the reach of terrorists. The civilian deaths caused by the USA and the UK in Afghanistan and Iraq have been a propaganda gift to al-Qaeda. Yet there are no serious efforts to curb military expenditure by any major power. Nor (despite reluctant admission of tactical errors in Iraq by Bush and Blair) is there any fundamental review of the effectiveness of current military strategy.

Placed side-by-side, and reinforcing each other, these four trends put the world on course for catastrophe.

Are there any signs of hope? We can identify three:

1. Quite a lot is known about how local stakeholders can work to contain or defuse conflict on the ground, and there are a growing number of small-scale success stories. Successful peacebuilding involves: the inclusion of all parties in dialogue; real listening to and addressing of grievances; and provision of alternative employment for those recruited to violence.
2. There is increasing realisation that local successes can easily 'backslide' into violence when the policies of powerful external players (such as the USA and its allies) are not properly aligned to local realities and aspirations. Iraq is teaching our governments hard lessons, which cannot be concealed from an increasingly well-informed electorate.
3. Increased education and global communication mean that more people are seeing the dire consequences of our actions and the need for alternatives. This new global awareness has thrown up three powerful social movements: the environmental movement; the global justice movement; and the peace movement. Until now they have operated relatively separately, and with differing degrees of purchase on the behaviour of political and economic elites. Now is the time to recognise that they are three

indispensable pillars of a broad unified movement for global survival. No one movement can succeed without the others.

We cannot achieve disarmament without climate control. We cannot have clean water for everyone without trade justice. We cannot eliminate terrorism without developing alternatives to oil. All of these linkages are components of a 'sustainable security' approach to the world's problems.

The main feature of this approach is that it does not attempt to unilaterally control threats through the use of force ('attack the symptoms'), but rather it aims to cooperatively resolve the root causes of those threats using the most effective means available ('cure the disease'). The approach is preventative, in that it addresses the likely causes of conflict and instability well before the ill effects are felt, rather than waiting until the crisis is underway and then attempting to control the situation, at which point it is often too late.

Is this achievable? Not if we simply wait for governments to act. They are too focussed on their own narrow national and economic interests. The diverse groups within civil society will need to coordinate their efforts to convince governments that this new approach is practical and effective, and is the only real way to ensure security.

We citizens of the first decade of the 21st century have both an awesome responsibility, and an unprecedented power to act together. What we decide in the next five to ten years could change the future of this planet more profoundly than any other period in recent history, with stakes that have never been higher.

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Some of the material in this article was previously published on the OpenDemocracy.net website on 12 June, 2006; see: http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/global_security_3630.jsp

Prof Sloboda's SGR conference presentation on these issues can be downloaded from: <http://www.sgr.org.uk/conferences.html>

Reference

- 1 Abbott, C., Rogers, P., Sloboda, J. (2006). Global Responses to Global Threats: Sustainable Security for the 21st Century. Oxford Research Group. <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/>