CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

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International Security Programme Workshop Summary

European Security and Defence Forum

Workshop 1: Changing Concepts of Security and Defence

Alexis Crow

The London School of Economics and Political Science

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Introduction

When contemplating matters of security and defence, both policy-makers and academics find it increasingly difficult to explain what it means to be secure in the contemporary strategic environment. In the post-Cold War world, threats which were once easily defined and categorised have now diffused into complex security challenges which are transnational in nature. The identifiable gap between theory and practice continues to be problematic. While scholars and policy-makers seek to address the realities of security and defence there remains a clear impasse between real-world policy implementation on one hand, and academic concepts and theories on the other.

With a view toward transcending this divide, participants of the inaugural workshop of the European Security and Defence Forum gathered to debate the concepts and practice of security and defence. The mood of the day was one of pragmatism. Those in attendance - members of the government, policy-makers, academics, and individuals in the private sector - were by no means overly sanguine in their assessment of the contemporary strategic environment. There was also a significant amount of consensus regarding the nature of the security agenda, and our current understanding of security and defence.

Security and defence, security vs. defence

Many participants affirmed that our understanding of the concepts of security and defence have changed immensely since the end of the Cold War, and indeed since the attacks of 11 September 2001. Rather than countering tangible, easily identifiable threats, Western countries now face a multitude of complex security challenges and risks which cross borders with ease. These include: terrorism, transnational and organised crime, drug trafficking, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy security, piracy, cyber-war, climate change, and financial collapse. Participants unanimously agreed that military and defence as traditionally conceived can only be one tool in effectively countering these risks. There has been a recent development in securitisation as some of these complex challenges have been integrated into the national security agenda of many Western countries. This trend led one commentator to propose that Ministries of War, having evolved into Ministries of Defence, might in time become Ministries of Security. It was largely agreed that defence no longer encompasses all aspects of security, and the military is only one tool out of many that can be effective in confronting complex security challenges.

Certain fundamental questions were raised: primarily, to what extent does defence help security, and to what extent must defence change its role? Security itself is a loaded term: security for whom? For citizens of nations, the EU, NATO, or the international community? The EU speaks of citizen or human security: what exactly does this mean? Is security a desired end-state, or is it a means by which we achieve something else? Is the constant discourse on security and the seemingly ever-expanding range of threats making citizens feel *insecure*? In the midst of these multifarious risks, do we need new concepts to frame our understanding of security?

One participant highlighted three different conceptual frameworks with which to view the contemporary strategic environment: firstly, that of global security interventionism, in which there are perceived threats to national security that can only be dealt with by intervening abroad; secondly, that of great power confrontation, in which the military is a key (if not the sole) actor; and thirdly, that of domestic law enforcement (favoured by Continental Europeans) according to which threats and risks should not be dealt with by overseas intervention. Throughout the day, the discussion mainly centred on the first paradigm, which aptly describes entrenched operations in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. As one commentator noted, the contemporary discourse on security and defence usually follows the operation of the day. Politicians are complicit in this process as well. Amidst the process of justifying intervention and describing engagement in these theatres they often adopt the language of complex dangers, security challenges, and risks. Surrounded with a multiplicity of issues - both foreign and domestic - which are difficult to control, it becomes all too easy to resort to the language of security without adequately underpinning it with a strategic foundation of concepts and theories.

Simplicity vs. complexity

Another central theme was that of simplicity vs. complexity. Again, one of the principal questions to be addressed was that of the evident divide between academia and policy – or theory and practice – in security and defence. As many commentators elucidated, this gap exists and endures because of the increasingly self-referential and abstruse nature of security studies. In other words, security studies have become increasingly academic and exclusionary and thus fail to translate easily into policy. In some cases this divide is increased by career incentives, such as research output assessments which place a low priority on making theories and concepts accessible to policymakers. According to the American scholar Joseph Nye, there are so

few academics in President Obama's Administration precisely because academics have become out-of-touch with reality. Yet policy-makers need a language which can be easily understood by their constituents. They must be able to explain their stance on issues of security and defence in relatively straightforward terms, and thus cannot adopt the strategic studies discourse which has become progressively abstract. Even though the simplicity of the strategic environment of the Cold War has disappeared, politicians still need concepts which are comprehensible in the public arena.

Yet even if scholars do actively seek to bridge the gap from their study to the real world of policy, there are limitations in applying overarching concepts to security and defence. Many participants highlighted the dangers of thinking 'compartmentally': the world of security and defence is not neatly circumscribed and our thinking should avoid simplistic categorisation. Academics and politicians need to adopt the same discourse in describing the contemporary strategic environment, yet even when they agree on easily definable concepts, an understanding of these concepts will not always simplify the challenges at hand. Even the way in which we measure our achievements is no longer straightforward: whereas once conflicts were fought with clearly defined success and identifiable victors, the nature of contemporary security is such that there are no wins, losses, or tangible defeats. As several commentators clarified, we increasingly grapple with terms to describe both our failures and our accomplishments. A feeling of insecurity has pervaded Western societies: our inability to articulate even small success – coupled with an unending discussion of the myriad dangers and risks – has resulted in a sense of a loss of control in our societies.

'Follow the money'

The sub-prime mortgage crisis in America which resulted in a global financial crisis has catalysed a central debate in defence and security. With budget cutbacks looming, difficult questions are being raised regarding future investment in manpower and materiel. Should defence expenditures go toward developing sophisticated aircraft and weaponry to be used in great power confrontation, or alternatively, should money be spent on outfitting armed forces for unconventional conflicts and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations? US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has urged an overhaul of the Pentagon's military-industrial complex in favour of allocating funds to low-intensity conflicts. The Kremlin has also initiated a military reform that streamlines existing units in favour of a smaller and more mobile force. What are the incentives for other states to follow suit? To what extent are we

witnessing the obsolescence of conventional war waged by major powers? Participants agreed that the increasing trend of global security interventionism has left many nations overstretched. Coupled with the reality of the financial crisis, we may be too overstretched to carry out an idealistic foreign policy, and thus need to take a more pragmatic view of the limits of military might.

Elements of the trend towards securitisation are also largely about following the money. There are contracts to be signed and money to be made if one can make the case that AIDS or immigration is no longer merely an issue of health or law enforcement, but now constitutes a security threat. Broadening this view of security also forces a reallocation of resources within local authorities, the diplomatic service, and the defence establishment. Classic models of hard power defence and security are forced to share the table with a widening range of security perspectives.

Diverse concepts of security may increasingly reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of society in the twenty-first century, however many participants noted the burden it places on an increasingly fearful population. Beset by a broad range of issues now categorised as security concerns, it is no wonder that many citizens feel their sense of community is breaking down. As this trend towards widespread securitisation continues, people move from fear to complacency as they choose to ignore the drumbeat of supposedly imminent danger. This has the pernicious effect of crying wolf at a societal level, as both real and exaggerated security issues are disregarded in equal measure.

Domestic/ International/ Multinational/ Supranational

Another key question that was debated is the divide (or lack thereof) between the domestic and the international, and also whether a security challenge should be dealt with nationally or multinationally. One commentator labelled this the ‘transnational dilemma’ or the ‘multinational paradox’, because most contemporary strategic challenges are transnational and global in nature, they are perhaps best met with a multinational force, rather than an individual actor. Yet are multinational forces always effective? If the danger is so dire, and directly puts one’s own national security at risk, is it worth relying on a potentially slow-moving multinational force? Conversely, given that risks are often transnational in origin, and hence territorially unbounded, can they ever be effectively countered by a sole national actor?

Yet another question was frequently raised throughout the day: can the lessons of our domestic experience in dealing with security challenges be

appropriately translated into the international sphere? If so, what types of lessons are worth adapting? Furthermore, is there a strong connection between policy-making at the domestic level, and policy-making at the international/supranational level? Are existing international frameworks best suited for addressing the security challenges facing individual national agendas?

The comprehensive approach

One way in which the distinction between the lessons of domestic and international experience has been blurred is in the comprehensive approach to security. In theatres such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, NATO allies and EU member states have increasingly inserted a civil component into their military operations. As one participant elucidated, COIN and the comprehensive approach are very much inter-linked in that they both seek to develop relationships with the local population and to contribute to the establishment of governance and the rule of law.

This approach is complex and requires multi-departmental cooperation. It can be flexible to the point of ambiguity, with vague ownership of strategy, and initiatives often surviving only at the lowest common denominator. It is essentially a political activity, and its failure or lack of results may not be due to a flaw in the concept, but to a fundamental lack of political will. Most commentators agreed on the validity of the civil/military nexus as a *theory*, but does it really work in *practice*?

In current operational theatres, development agencies and the military are increasingly at odds with one another. While the military holds what one participant called the 'scorpion baby' of any given conflict, are the NGOs actually working in tandem to share the burden? While the military and government aid agencies are subordinate to political control, NGOs are by definition independent. Non-alignment is often an overt goal of humanitarian and development NGOs and allows them to maintain what they consider to be a sufficient amount of 'humanitarian space'. This tension is often irresolvable due to a distinct divergence of strategic interests.

It was noted that the comprehensive approach is easier to actualise domestically, as opposed to within an organisation such as NATO. The potential for reputational damage - being perceived as something less than a team player - is greater when the comprehensive approach is attempted within government. At the national level, the comprehensive approach becomes largely an exercise in psychodynamics. The attempt at

comprehensiveness brings together groups who are not, and will never be, under a single command. The challenge is to construct arrangements that will maximise opportunities for cooperation.

While the comprehensive approach encompasses both civil and military aspects, perhaps it is not a concept that could be applied consistently to all theatres. As one commentator remarked, there may not be a 'one size fits all' aspect of the comprehensive approach; it might be well-suited for some conflicts, but not for others. The question was then posed whether we need new concepts. The comprehensive approach has been a centrepiece of security and defence policy as of late, but perhaps a new articulation of ways with which to conceive and address complex security challenges is needed.

International Organisations (the EU/NATO)

The workshop discussed international security organisations and particularly their adaptability and utility in the twenty-first century. The debate was bound mainly by a transatlantic discourse and specifically the institutions of the EU and NATO. Participants asked how cooperation is either hindered or promoted both within and between these organisations. Since 11 September 2001, both EU member states and NATO allies have disagreed on what constitutes a threat to security and stability. While energy security may be of primary concern to some members, it may not be for others. Even if members agree on the identification of a risk they may not always agree on the best approach to counter that risk. The complex nature of the contemporary security environment not only hinders cooperation, it also delays the formulation and implementation of a coherent and unifying strategic doctrine.

It was noted that academic literature lacks developed theories dealing with international security organisations. The discussion began by defining the fundamental role of institutions, which is to achieve cooperation. Cooperation is hindered by two problems. The first is a distribution problem, where actors have difficulty agreeing on basic principles. Finding ways to agree is difficult in the EU but easier in NATO, which possesses more robust methods of gaining consensus. The second is a compliance problem, where agreement may have been reached, but there remains mutual suspicion of cheating. Independent agencies are needed to fill a monitoring role and reduce the opportunities for cheating, though gaining agreement for the creation and robust empowerment of these institutions raises yet another hurdle.

Although the relevance and efficacy of the EU and NATO are at times questioned, it is clear that both institutions are here to stay. While some

commentators challenged NATO's relevance, others pointed to French President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to reintegrate France into NATO's military command structure as evidence of NATO's continued vitality. Similarly, while some pointed to the EU's lack of a fully developed security and defence potential, others cited the political consolidation enjoyed by EU members (and perhaps no longer by NATO allies). As one participant remarked, the EU and NATO have proved themselves to be survivors in the post-Cold War era, but this does not mean that they are dynamic as institutions. The shifting role of security in the EU, from preventing war and hegemony among members in its first 50 years, to the current focus on spreading international peace and stability, places further stress on these institutions and provokes an array of new internal cooperation problems.

Cooperation within the EU and NATO seems a small task when compared with cooperation *between* these institutions. While many commentators referred to the ability of the EU and NATO to work together on the ground, they placed the blame on the lack of political cohesion in Brussels. Although there may be cooperation at the tactical level, such cooperation is absent at the strategic level, in spite of apparent agreement among the relevant officials and policy-makers. The tendency to consider the EU as the civilian complement to NATO's military might has not been helped by comments such as 'we don't do nation-building' from Washington. Rather than designate one institution as best for one specific type of conflict, participants largely agreed that the decision to send EU or NATO elements into a specific theatre should be judged on a case-by-case basis. Thus, in examining the contemporary strategic environment, we should keep cool and make a pragmatic decision to determine which force would be most effective in a particular situation. Ultimately it is both capabilities and resources at hand - as well as the political will - which will determine the success of the mission.

Conclusion

The inaugural workshop of the European Security and Defence Forum addressed not only the gap between academia and policy-making and how it might be bridged, but also, on a more pragmatic level, the key issues in contemporary security and defence. It was agreed that the increasingly self-referential and exclusionary quality of security studies prevented scholarship from being easily understood and adopted by policy-makers. Nevertheless, despite a divergence in certain terms and concepts, academics and practitioners unanimously identified the shift in the nature of the international security environment, from one of relative simplicity and clearly defined

threats of the Cold War, to a fluid and dynamic world characterised by complex dangers and risks which are transnational in origin.

Current strategic complexities should caution against thinking in boxes of neatly defined concepts, even if these concepts are deemed to be 'correct' for one reason or another. It also means that achievements can no longer be measured simply in terms of success and failure. Although this may be difficult for electorates to accept, participants highlighted the need to tell an accurate story. Why exactly are we engaged in an operation, and what might we gain from the engagement? If the military is not the only solution, what are the other tangible instruments to be employed? Even if security is an end, it is an end that might not ever be achieved. If security becomes ever more loosely defined, with new issues brought to the agenda, governments will become increasing burdened by unreasonable public expectation. Perpetual, all-encompassing securitisation of these issues is neither realistic nor feasible. With all our talk of multifarious risks and dangers, it remains to be seen what level of insecurity societies are willing to accept.

These questions and many more were raised throughout the day and participants were eager to debate them in a cool and pragmatic manner. Perhaps this is indicative of both intellectual and physical overstretch. In a world plagued by complex security challenges and financial collapse, we can no longer afford to be idealistic in our defence and security policies. No matter how perfect the theory, ultimately we are limited to two realities, one tangible, and one ethereal: funds to finance operations, and the political will to sustain them.