Now Comes the Real Danger

Recommended Citation

Thomas Homer-Dixon, "Now Comes the Real Danger", Special Policy Forum 9/11, September 17, 2001, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/now-comes-the-real-danger/

September 17, 2001

By Thomas Homer-Dixon

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Thomas Homer-Dixon, Director of the Centre for the Study of Peace and Conflict at the University of Toronto. It originally appeared in the Toronto Globe and Mail on September 12.

The author argues that the attack demonstrated the downside of technological diffusion and growing interdependence. Not only did technology allow the attacks to take place, but it also helped fuel the rise of terrorists groups by making people more aware of growing economic disparities. He also argues that any military response has to be carefully calibrated to avoiding exacerbating the situation.

II. Essay by Thomas Homer-Dixon

"Now Comes The Real Danger"
By Thomas Homer-Dixon

Some events shatter the order of things -- the routines and regularities of our lives that we rely upon for our sense of safety and our sense, most importantly, of who we are and where we are going. Some events change our perceptions forever. The world never looks the same again afterward. Suddenly, the reliable landmarks of life seem strange and distorted -- recognizable, yet simultaneously weirdly unrecognizable.

It will take us a long time to unpack the full meaning of September 11's events, to develop a coherent understanding of what they mean for global society, for our nations, and for each of us as individuals. Yet three things are clear right now: first, the problem of international terrorism isn't going to go away, in fact it's almost certain to get worse; second, although a decisive, forceful response is necessary, force isn't enough by itself -- we must also act to address the roots of this madness; and, third, the worst thing we can do is overreact. Overreaction is exactly what the

perpetrators want, and overreaction poses a grave threat to our democratic institutions.

The problem is going to get worse because of three trends, two technological and one social. New technologies are shifting power downward from large institutions and governments to small groups and individuals. Sometimes this is a good thing, as when the Internet empowers citizens to better participate in democratic processes. But sometimes it's a bad thing, because some groups are malign, and because one technology that's diffusing downward is an extraordinary capacity to destroy.

Because of progress in materials engineering and miniaturization of electronics, explosives and the like, weapons are becoming cheaper, lighter, more rugged, more accurate, easier to use, and more powerful. Meanwhile new communication technologies -- from satellite phones to the Internet -- allow terrorists and criminal syndicates to marshal their resources and coordinate their actions around the planet. As these trends continue, it's easier for smaller and smaller numbers of people to hurt larger and larger numbers. Despite all the utopian hype, the new gadgets entering our lives are distinctly double-edged swords: We've unleashed technological forces that we don't remotely understand and almost certainly can't control.

Another trend is the growing complexity and interdependence of our technological systems, which makes it more likely that damage to one system component will ramify outwards to other components. We've seen such knock-on effects in the globe's tightly wired financial system, when a crisis in a distant economy spreads like wildfire to others; we've even seen it in mundane infrastructure systems like electricity grids.

Terrorists can exploit this greater interdependence to magnify their disruptive power (that's a key reason they went after the World Trade Center -- at one blow, they may have killed a significant portion of the most skilled financial experts in United States).

The first rule of modern terrorism, as one as astute analyst notes, should be to "find critical but nonredundant parts of the system and sabotage them according to your purposes."

The third trend is social: the rapidly widening gulf between the planet's richest and poorest groups, and between individuals and societies that thrive in the face of our world's dramatic new challenges and those that fail and succumb. While the lives of people in even the world's most impoverished corners have generally improved in recent decades, their progress has been snail-like compared to the stunning enrichment of the wealthiest.

Despite the miracles of modern communication and transportation, never in human history have the differences of wealth and opportunity among us been so great. These differences breed envy and frustration and, ultimately, anger. Thanks to the spread of TV, today's disadvantaged know better than ever before what they are missing. And thanks to the spread of cheap, portable, and powerful technologies of violence, they also have a greater capacity than ever before to harm the targets of their anger.

If this is the future, how should we respond?

The natural reaction is to strike back -- fast, furiously, and hard. Send in the cruise missiles and bombers; smash the bastards into the ground! But who, exactly? Even if the perpetrators of yesterday's horror were state-backed (and it's not clear they were), their links to specific governments will be evanescent threads, almost impossible to identify, easy to deny. Groups that do these things can now be so small, so dispersed, and so mobile that dealing with them is like trying to put your finger on quicksilver -- crushing one cluster simply causes it to break into a thousand pieces

and reform elsewhere.

We can't afford to look weak at this critical moment. Some military response is essential. But a fast, unconsidered reaction will make us look weak, not strong. Our response has to be precise and carefully calibrated. This requires very good military intelligence, and one has to wonder if such intelligence is available, because the events yesterday were, more than anything else, a monumental intelligence failure -- a failure, at least symbolically, on the scale of the failures that led to Pearl Harbor.

The very worst thing we can do is lash out at whoever seems to be nearby and plausibly connected with the horror. Because the "enemy" in this case is so diffuse and indeterminate, it would be easy to turn against groups and people within our societies -- against anybody who looks different, who expresses opinions that vary from the norm, or who has been associated, at one time or another, with suspect people or causes.

We must guard against this impulse. It's exactly what the terrorists want. They believe their appalling attacks will provoke us to reveal the true bigotry and violence of our societies that lurk behind the facade of democracy and tolerance.

Make no mistake. The unfolding terrorist threat in coming years will pose a profound test of our democratic institutions. Can we maintain the freedom of association that we've enjoyed in the past? The freedom of movement? The vigorous diversity of opinion? Will people who look a bit strange or different be singled out for random searches and interrogations? Can we resist the natural tendency to become more intolerant, suspicious, bitter, and militarized? Most importantly, can we remember that the problem will never go away if we don't address the underlying disparities that help motivate such violence?

Some events shatter the order of things. The triumphalism that has permeated Western society in the last decade -- the widely accepted conceit that Western capitalism, democracy, and science have brought us to the end of history -- rings somewhat hollow now. History marches forward still, and a startling new chapter opened yesterday.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/now-comes-th-
-real-danger/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org