We're Safer than You Think

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Abstract

This article examines terrorism, arguing that the goal of terrorists is to invoke fear into individuals. The consequences of terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Paris, among other places, is that the perceptions that terrorism is a threat to national security are high. This work contends that such fears are unwarranted as it is more likely that one dies in a traffic accident than a terrorist attack. Delving into the International Relations literature, this article highlights the current debates about terrorism and threats to security.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, fear is on the rise. A December 2015 poll showed 40 percent of the American people saying that national security and terrorism were their top concern, with job creation and economic growth coming in a distant second at 23 percent.[1] But even before these dramatic and disturbing events, political elites in the U.S., probably more than mass opinion, were worried. In 2009, two-thirds of the members of the Council on Foreign Relations reported believing that the world the U.S. faced was more dangerous than it had been during the Cold War.[2] Three years later the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, claimed, "We are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime,"[3] and the director of National Intelligence James Clapper, similarly said, "Looking back over my more than a half century in intelligence I have not experienced a time when we've been beset by more crises and threats around the globe."[4] Taking these concerns to heart, on December 22, 2015 the Dallas symphony cancelled its European tour "due to the recent and tragic events in Europe and the United States, and based on extensive conversations with national and international security professionals."[5]

The point of this brief article is that these fears are unwarranted.[6] The most dangerous thing I and most of us do every day is to cross the street; deaths from traffic accidents dwarf those from terrorism. The comparison to the Cold War is also telling; although there is no objective estimate of how likely nuclear war was then, let alone of how likely nuclear war with Russia or China is in the foreseeable future, the consequenc-

es of the latter would of course be dreadful, but nothing like the civilization-ending impact of the former.

So why are people saying such foolish things? In part—but I believe only in small part—people are consciously exaggerating for bureaucratic, political, or personal reasons. It would hardly behoove the head of the intelligence establishment to say something like: "Although there are no grave dangers to American national security, there are a lot of smaller problems we need to be aware of and multiple interests that while less than vital, still require attention." Not only budgets but people's sense of mission are entangled with believing that what they do is vital. During political campaigns (which consume more and more of the electoral cycle) advantage often goes to a candidate or a party that can claim that the opponents dangerously neglect American security. The media also has both an interest in playing up danger and an outlook that focuses on them. Bad news is generally good for circulation, and reporters and editors believe that it is their responsibility to keep a sharp eye out for threats to the country.

But this does not explain why so many members of the general public are fearful. In part, of course, they are picking up on the cues provided by the elites. This is not all there is to it, however. Although most of the dangers to our lives come in the form of everyday activities like driving, people both overestimate the degree of control they have over their lives and are more fearful of risks they feel that they cannot control. We incorrectly think that we are about-average drivers and that if are careful we can take care of ourselves. By contrast, it is next to impossible for any of us to influence the chance of dying in a terrorist attack. Furthermore, each terrorist attack gets deeply embedded in our memories because they are vivid and widely covered in the media, and the irony is that the extensive coverage is due to the fact that they are so rare. Even traffic accidents that kill significant numbers of people, such as bad bus accidents, occur frequently enough so that we have come to expect them. The very fact that terrorism is so infrequent makes an instance unexpected and therefore more impactful.

Unprecedented Security

The greatest threat to national security comes from war among the major powers, and so our starting point is that those who are so worried have lost sight of the fact that the world used to be dangerous be-

cause these states used to fight each other with some regularity. By contrast, currently the leading powers—the U.S., the states that form the EU, and Japan—form a security community.[7] According to Karl Deutsch, a security community is a group of countries who not only are at peace, but among whom war is unthinkable.[8] This is a very restricted category. Even countries who remain at peace with each other for prolonged periods often think about and plan for war with one another. It is exceedingly rare for major states to fail to do so, and when they have put the thought of war between them out of their minds, the reason often is the pressing threat from a common enemy. Indeed, it was the perception of a common threat from the USSR that was partly responsible for the rise of the security community, but that country's demise has not led to the community's demise.

The importance of this break with the past hardly can be exaggerated: it is not an exaggeration to say that the history of world politics has been dominated by war and the shadow of war among the most powerful states. My definition of leading powers excludes Russia and the PRC, and a skeptic might argue that it was designed with that purpose in mind. Nevertheless, even if a war involving these two countries remains possible, one reason why these possibilities receive as much attention as they do is the lack of greater dangers. Furthermore, when we look at the possible causes of a war between NATO and Russia or the U.S. (and/or Japan) and China we see that, despite some overheated rhetoric growing out of conflicts over Ukraine and the East and South China seas, the issues are not direct and vital to the U.S. That is, only those with overheated imaginations can envision Russia as a military threat to Europe, and the danger to the U.S. arising from China's rise is indirect only, stemming as it does from the maintenance of America's Cold War alliances in East Asia.

China does indeed challenge the U.S. dominance in East Asia, but even leaving aside the pacifying effects of nuclear weapons and high levels of economic interdependence, the U.S. has room to accommodate the rising power and the level of threat is much lower than that which characterized much of IR in the past. The same is true for the proliferation of nuclear weapons, another issue high on the American agenda. Even those who reject the argument that proliferation will be stabilizing will have difficulty estimating the magnitude of the danger, and therefore the level of effort and resources that should be arrayed against it.

Although rank-ordering these and other threats is difficult, more difficult still is putting them on some absolute scale. The result, I believe, is that the American leadership if not the mass public has lost its sense of proportion in the international dangers being posed, and concomitantly has failed to see how much safer we are now.

In other words, the leading powers now have an unprecedented degree of security, or at least security against threats from other countries (I am leaving aside the dangers of climate change and other menaces from nature even if we can trace them to human activities), and the result is to give greater salience to minor threats like terrorism.

Francis Fukuyama famously declared the "end of history." Understood—or rather misunderstood—as the claim that history and conflict had come to an end, this is clearly incorrect. But this is not what Fukuyama argued. His claim is that we have seen the end of clashing ideologies that purport to be universally valid and that, as such, seek to spread themselves throughout the world.[9] There is much to this. While the ideology of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism, far from converting everyone, has spurred a backlash, there is no other general contender such as fascism or communism. Islamic fundamentalism (the term is imprecise if not misleading, but there is no other one in widespread use) rejects and seeks to exclude Western liberalism, but in no realistic sense aspires to spread its truth to the entire world. The PRC has also followed its own path, and the combination of some degree of economic liberalization coupled with authoritarian rule and enriching the leaders has produced dramatic results. But China has not touted this as a model for others to follow, its success may depend on factors particularly Chinese, and others have not flocked to approach.

As Arnold Wolfers explains, when states have met their needs for security and autonomy, they often turn toward what he called "milieu goals"[10] which arise from non-material motives. For the West today, this means democracy, human rights, and limits on if not the elimination of corruption. These embody the way of life in the West, or, to be more precise, the way the West likes to see itself. The argument for spreading these values and ways of behaving is partly that they will enhance international cooperation and so be in the interests of the West, but at least as important is that they will benefit the societies that adopt them. Whether or not this is the case is fortunately

beyond my scope here; all that is relevant is the claim that milieu goals are increasingly important in world politics.

One large open question is the extent to which the West, and especially the U.S., will seek to impose its values on others by force, a question which is related to whether its leaders believe that countries with different social systems are a threat to it. The obvious example is the war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003, which I believe can be traced in large part to the fact that President George W. Bush held what Kenneth Waltz called a "second image" theory of the causes of international conflict[11] in believing that the fundamental source of a state's foreign policy was the nature of its domestic regime, and therefore that a regime like Iraq's that ruled its own people by force would inevitably behave in a parallel fashion internationally. The sad results of the war have dampened the enthusiasm for such enterprises and weakened the hold of the theory behind it, but whether this is a permanent or only a temporary development is yet to be determined. Even if this war and the overthrow of Qaddafi did not make us less safe, they were not the product of real security threats that have historically played such a large role in international politics.

Terrorism

Whether or not America's previous adventures have led to the current bout of terrorism, my previous analysis does not address the validity of current fears. My claim that they are vastly exaggerated is quite simple. The extent of a threat depends on the probability that it will materialize multiplied by the damage incurred if it does. The last factor is crucial. As horrible as they were, the recent attacks in Paris and San Bernardino and the downing of the Russian airliner over Sinai killed relatively few people. Of course this is no solace to the relatives of those who died, and every individual death is a tragedy that affects a wider circle of people, but in the cold-blooded calculus of national security these numbers are tiny and pale not only in comparison to previous wars, but also when compared to everyday threats as noted at the start of this essay.

A rebuttal is that the past does not always predict the future, and the fact that terrorist attacks have so far killed only small numbers does not mean that this pattern will continue to hold true. Of course this is right, but it is crucial to realize that terrorists can kill massive numbers only if they use infectious biological agents or nuclear weapons (a "dirty bomb" that would use conventional explosives to spread radioactive material is a borderline case). To estimate the probability that terrorists could obtain such weapons is subject to dispute and beyond my expertise.[12] But we should note that even if terrorists could steal or make such weapons, they would also have to bring them to an American or a European city, a feat that makes the Paris attack seem like child's play in comparison. The danger cannot be dismissed, of course, and one irony is that fear as reflected in government policy may be a self-denying prophecy. Because government officials are themselves deeply worried, or feel that they have to appease the public by acting on fears they do not believe, they may take extraordinary precautions that greatly reduce the danger. In a further twist, to produce the sustained spending and public mobilization needed to continue these policies, officials may fan public fears (think of the "if you see something, say something" campaign).

It is of course hard for the public—and even for experts—to estimate the likelihood of large-scale terrorist attacks. What evidence would be relevant to this task? If we hear that a plot has been foiled should we raise our estimate because it shows how active terrorists are or lower because it shows the success of vigilance and defensive measures?

On balance, I find it hard to see how terrorism is one of the major scourges of contemporary life. But many people take it as such, and indeed that is the whole point of terrorists. If they had sources of effective power, they would use it to overthrow the governments they despise, alter the societies they find loathsome, and establish their values as supreme. They cannot do this, and instead the goal of terrorism is to terrorize—to induce fear and expectation that much greater harm will follow. I do not think it will, but the frightened and frightening expectations themselves are not without their consequences.

Notes

1 Jennet Hook, "New Poll Finds National Security Now the Top Concern," *Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2015.

2 For more, see Pew Research Center, *America's Place in the World 2009: An Investigation of Public and Leadership Opinion About International Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People & The Press in Association with the Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), http://www.people-press.org/file/legacy/pdf/569.pdf.

3 Quoted in Christopher Preble, "The Most Dangerous World Ever?" *Cato Policy Report*, September/October 2014.

4 Remarks on Worldwide Threat Assessment to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014.

5 "Orchestra Cancels Tour, Citing Terror Concerns," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2015.

6 For similar arguments, see John Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged" *The National Interest* January-February 129 (2014): pp. 9-30; John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

7 Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1, (March 2002): pp. 1-14; Jervis, "Force in Our Times," *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 4, (December 2011): pp. 403-425.

8 Karl Deutsch, et al., *Political Community in the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). For current applications, see Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett eds., *Security Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); for arguments similar to Fukuyama's, see John Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

10 Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), chapter 5.

11 Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

12 For the most thorough study, see Matthew Bunn, *The Gates of Hell: Guarding against Nuclear Theft and Terrorism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming).