Foreign weakness: A potential threat to U.S. security

Anthony Lake

Anthony Lake, Ph.D. served as a national security advisor to President Clinton from 1993-1996, and was referred to as the "point man of our foreign policy team" by the President. Lake held various positions in the State Department from 1962-1970 and again from 1977-1981. During these two periods, he served as: Foreign Service Officer, U.S. Vice Consul in Saigon and Hue, aide to Henry Kissinger, and Director of Policy Planning for President Carter. A former professor of international relations at Amherst College and Mount Holyoke College, Lake is a graduate of Harvard and Cambridge University, and received his Ph.D. from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is the author of several books and articles.

The era of globalization brings with it the erosion of national borders as well as major threats to the future security of the United States, Anthony Lake told the Global Executive Forum.

The U.S. is well equipped to handle traditional security threats, such as the kind emanating from Iraq and Iran. It is the nontraditional threats that pose the greatest challenge and potential danger.

"We have to redefine the meaning of national security these days," said Lake, naming three primary threats that demand attention:

- New forms of terrorism coupled with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Transnational crime.
- Ambiguous warfare.

The U.S. is at greater risk for terrorism than western European countries or Japan. "Our citizens are coming under increasing attack, and I don't think it is an accident. I think it is because terrorists think of us as the Great Satan," said Lake.

The New Terrorists

In spite of the fact that acts of terrorism are at an all time low, terrorist attacks are killing more people.

"Terrorism is changing," said Lake, pointing out that terrorists in years past usually had clear political affiliations and objectives. In contrast, today's terrorists are "lone wolves" who may be operating with a few other people. They tend to act out of hatred, revenge and religious extremism, rather than some grand political agenda in which violence is a bargaining chip to attain a specific goal.

This makes them more dangerous, said Lake, "because members of terrorist organizations that are pursuing a political agenda generally are not going to take actions that would so revolt society that they would damage their political cause."

Consequently, these new terrorists, who may have the support of other states or terrorist organizations, have a unique advantage in evading detection.

"They are harder to find because they're not part of organized groups that can be monitored. They are harder to deter because you cannot go after them. Nor can you warn the state that is supporting them, since that support is ambiguous" and, therefore, hard to prove.
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"The Dreaded Nexus"

Where terrorists and weapons of mass destruction come together is what Lake calls "the dreaded nexus." This is a growing danger, said Lake, and it is not limited to the nuclear arsenal. While access to nuclear materials can be gained through international crime organizations or nations with lax security, the greater danger is in the increasing possibilities of the theft or development of chemical and biological weapons.

"This is not a theoretical point," Lake stressed, pointing to recent incidents in which people associated with hate groups have gained access to the chemical ricin and Bubonic plague bacteria.

Lake recalled the Aum Shinrikyo's sarin gas attack in a Japanese subway, responsible for killing 12 people and injuring 5,000. These terrorists had considered an attack in the U.S. before the Tokyo police apprehended them.

What is alarming, said Lake, is that neither the CIA nor the FBI had any intelligence on the Aum Shinrikyo, despite the fact that the group had 50,000 members, a billion dollars in assets, and offices in Bonn, New York City, Moscow and Sri Lanka. This was a major intelligence failure.

"The FBI was not monitoring the Aum in the U.S. because they had no probable cause to do so since the CIA didn't know what the Aum was doing in Japan."

Foreign terrorism is the CIA's responsibility; domestic terrorism -- crime -- is the FBI's. "These distinctions are becoming blurred, and we need to see all of them as one bundle of issues that require a coordinated attack by the government as a whole," said Lake.

One needs only to plug into the Internet to learn how to make deadly chemical weapons for large or small scale attacks. Called "Silent Death," these recipes are readily available to everyone with a modem.

Said Lake, "Most experts, and I agree, think that the most likely and damaging attack will be biological . . . an attack that I believe could come to the United States at some point in the next few years. And I'm not alone in that judgment."

Asked why, if it is so easy, there has been no chemical attack to date, Lake said, "Because it hasn't happened, doesn't mean that it won't."

This possibility has not escaped the attention of the government. In 120 cities across the country, people are being trained to deal with the aftermath of such an attack.

Transnational Crime

Less dramatic, but no less dangerous than chemical or biological terrorism to the well being of Americans, is international crime. Consider the impacts:

- Illegal drugs are costing the U.S. about $67 billion a year.
- $1 billion in stolen cars is taken out of the U.S. every year, seriously affecting our insurance rates.
- More and more Americans are being kidnapped and murdered abroad.
- Billions of dollars a year are being lost to transnational corruption.
- Cyber crime is costing American businesses hundreds of millions of dollars every year and has the potential to cripple the economy.
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"Transnational crime is a very large and growing problem and it's going to get worse," said Lake.

The profits generated by transnational crime enable criminal organizations to work more closely with terrorist groups. "And it means that criminal avarice is overcoming politics." In El Salvador, right wing and left wing para military groups are working together in highjacking enterprises, just as Israeli and Palestinian criminals are conducting profitable car-jacking operations.

"If any foreign government were doing to the U.S. what transnational crime is doing to the U.S., we would go to war. But we don't, and this is a silent crisis."

To attack this problem, the U.S. needs to help create new regimes that can deal with the many faces of transnational crime, and then "accommodate our legal structures to those regimes."

Ambiguous Warfare

"The U.S. is so overwhelmingly powerful now that it does not make sense for a foreign enemy to attack us in traditional military ways," said Lake. That leaves the U.S. relatively more vulnerable to nontraditional attacks against its military forces.

The problem: How does the U.S., with all its military might, retaliate for an attack when the origin of that attack cannot be proved?

"Suppose that there were an attack on Americans clearly sponsored by a foreign state," Lake speculated. "The United States must respond for the sake of future deterrence. But there is a dilemma."

The dilemma: A conventional military strike against that state could prompt it to launch another terrorist attack without taking responsibility and without proof that they did it. More Americans would be killed.

"Do you attack them again when you can't prove they were behind it? Do you do nothing when everybody assumes that they were behind it?"

Ambiguous warfare negates the military power of the United States and creates a lopsided battlefield in favor of the terrorists.

"We have the military but we can't use it," observed a member of the Forum. "It's a deterrent as long as we maintain that power, but we really can't use it effectively against terrorism."

Thinking Strategically

It is important for the U.S. to engage in strategic thinking on a society-wide basis to deal with new national security threats, said Lake.

We need to move beyond a cold war mentality, preparing for threats not only that flow from the strength of potential enemies, said Lake, but also from foreign weakness.

"It is the weakness of the yen, the weakness of Asian economies, the weakness of allies who will not join us in dealing with all these kinds of threats."
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Sovereignty is another impediment to the search for strategic solutions. Due to the forces of globalization, all governments are daily losing some of their sovereignty. To save that sovereignty, governments need to work together to create the kinds of international regimes and institutions that can fight the proliferation of terrorism and crime, said Lake.

"The United States in particular is so caught up in issues of sovereignty and national pride that we are unwilling to cede any sovereignty to any international institution on almost any issue," said Lake.

"We need to adjust our thinking so that our political processes catch up to the demands of a very new era."

There are signs that the U.S. is beginning to focus on the new terrorism, said Lake. The antiterrorism bill is one indication. And the U.S. is taking the lead in trying to get the G8 to address the issue of international crime.

Said Lake, "I just don't think we're doing nearly enough, and neither are other members of the G8."

"John F. Kennedy cited a former Prime Minister as saying that the 1930s were the years that 'the locusts ate,'" noted Lake.

"I believe that I can hear the locusts munching right now."

Redefining the meaning of national security

Depending on your point of view, globalization is either the best path to peace in our time, or the end of the American way of life. What is certain, however, is that globalization, like Pandora's Box, has released a host of new ills that threaten the national security of the United States.

Economic crises can leap across oceans; diseases are spread as quickly as a 747 taking off in one country and landing in another; and criminals have a wider terrain for their activities.

"We now have a 24 hour stock market around the world, a 24 hour news service, and a 24 hour rumor mill that can change financial markets on a 24 hour basis," said Lake.

Even so, Lake is bullish on globalization, which "in its broadest terms is very good for the U.S.," he said.

"The U.S. is the world's only super power. I don't think there is another nation at any time in history that has had such global power and in all of the categories of power: military, economic, and culture." He added, "American culture is sweeping the world."

The United States' edge in all three categories of power "is both quantitative and qualitative, and flows precisely from the era of globalization."

The World Wide Web is fueling the rapid advance of globalization, but at the same time it is creating a new category of terrorism: cyber crime. This said Lake, "is a greater danger to our economic health than increases in energy costs or natural disasters."

A cyber attack could shut down Wall Street, resulting in billions of dollars in losses in just one day. A
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cyber attack could cripple transportation systems and create havoc in military operations.

"There are constant attacks on our military," said Lake, and the culprits might be professional terrorists or innocent kids perfecting their skills. "The problem is, you just don't know when there has been an attack; things can simply go wrong and you don't know it."

"We are very vulnerable to cyber terrorism," said Lake.