The Sources of Instability in the Twenty-First Century

Weak States, Armed Groups, and Irregular Conflict

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The world has changed! It has become more complex, with shadowy and seemingly unpredictable conflicts taking place around the globe. But there is a pattern to these fights. They are not unpredictable but discernable. The sources of instability in the twenty-first century's international security environment will largely result from a proliferation in the number of weak and failing states as well as powerful armed groups, some of which are able to affect fundamental security by causing major geopolitical damage in their own states, in various regions, or to the United States itself. Moreover, this proliferation creates new interactions and interrelationships between and among local, regional, and global players. These developments, in turn, are fostering the emergence of partnerships and coalitions comprised of armed groups, other nonstate actors, and authoritarian revisionist states. These formal and informal groupings employ an array of irregular violent and nonviolent means to extend their power and influence. A persistent and enduring pattern of irregular conflict is observable, and it will continue well into the twenty-first century. Faced with these security

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challenges, democratic states will likewise need to foster their own coalitions of both state and nonstate allies to oppose them. This article provides the broad contours of these developments through the lens of real-world cases.[1] In a 1997 speech, the commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Charles Krulak, warned that conflict and war in the future would be different from the conventional contingencies the Pentagon was prepared to fight. Titling his speech "Not like Yesterday," he counseled that this conventional mind-set could lead to military misfortunes: "[O]ur enemies will not allow us to fight the son of Desert Storm, but they will try to draw us into the stepchild of Chechnya. Our most dangerous enemies will challenge us asymmetrically in ways against which we are least able to bring strength to bear—as we witnessed in the slums of Mogadishu."[2]

General Krulak was considered way out of step by the other joint chiefs, the DoD bureaucracy, and the services. They did not think about or prepare for the conflicts he foresaw. Those irregular fights were considered at best tertiary security matters—internal disturbances, criminal enterprises, or ethnic group rivalries—of little interest to those US security institutions responsible for the conduct of warfare, diplomacy, and intelligence.[3]

The conflicts Krulak saw emerging in the 1990s burgeoned in the years following 9/11. As they did, other former general officers and officials came to the same conclusions. Consider Gen Rupert Smith, deputy SACEUR from 1998 to 2001. During his career in the British Army, he trained to fight twentieth-century "interstate industrialized war." But in the Cold War's aftermath, General Smith had to deal with conflicts that diverged considerably from that standard in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Then, in retirement, he witnessed the 9/11 attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and al-Qaeda's transnational operations.

Smith had seen enough. In his 2006 book, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern Age*, he declared: "It is now time to recognize that a paradigm shift in war has undoubtedly occurred: from armies with comparable forces doing battle *to* a strategic confrontation between a range of combatants . . . using different types of weapons, often improvised." Twentieth-century conventional war was being replaced by the new paradigm of "war amongst the people." And those conflicts, said Smith, "can take place anywhere: in the presence of civilians, against civilians, in defense of civilians."[4] Critical to making sense of this new state of affairs, he implied, was realization that wars between nation-states, all too common in the twentieth century, were becoming anomalies.

The idea that there was a paradigm shift in the conduct of conflict and war found its way into the US Department of Defense (DoD) in 2006. The 2006 iteration of the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (*QDR*)—the Pentagon's legislatively mandated every-four-year assessment of the strategies, capabilities, and forces the United States needs to manage today's conflicts and tomorrow's threats—asserted that irregular warfare had become a vital mission area and the services needed to become prepared for it. Post–9/11 combat was depicted as "irregular in its nature." Enemies in those fights were "not conventional military forces" belonging to nation-states. Rather, they included various armed nonstate actors who employed indirect and asymmetric means.

The 2006 *QDR* also set in motion irregular warfare initiatives inside the DoD leading to the December 2008 release of DoD Directive (DoDD) 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare* (*IW*). That directive was unambiguous about twenty-first-century conflict, declaring: "Irregular warfare is as strategically important as traditional warfare . . . [and it is essential to] maintain capabilities . . . so that the DOD is as effective in IW as it is in traditional [conventional] warfare." Moreover, for DoDD 3000.07 the capabilities required for each type of fight were different.[5]

What this all adds up to is the basic fact that today's world cannot be understood through the lens of the twentieth-century security paradigm. The nature of instability, conflict, and war has evolved dramatically beyond conventional fights between the armies of nation-states. An examination of conflict trends since the end of the Cold War provides empirical evidence of a prevalent and enduring pattern of irregular conflict and instability.[6] These trends constitute a pervasive part of a complex twenty-first-century international security environment in which violence, conflict, and war differ markedly from the ways in which the United States and other major states thought about and prepared for armed discord during most of the twentieth century.

There is little to suggest that this will change any time soon. This trend is here to stay for the foreseeable future. It constitutes the prevalent pattern of instability, and it will continue. To be sure, conventional war between states is still possible, but that will be more of an anomaly.

Characteristics of the Twenty-First-Century Security Environment

Given these developments, what are the particulars—the details—of the differences, new complexities, and changed conditions that characterize twenty-first-century instability, conflict, and war? And why are these developments not temporary disruptions or short-lived distractions but symptoms of a new security environment?

To answer these questions one must highlight the broad contours and present the big picture of these developments. The twenty-first-century security environment will, at minimum, be characterized by the following dimensions:

- A proliferation in the number of weak and failing states as well as powerful armed groups will be able through violent and nonviolent means to affect stability and security at the local, regional, and, in some instances, even global levels.
- This proliferation of actors creates new interactions and interrelationships between and among local, regional, and global players.
- These first two developments, in turn, foster the emergence of coalitions that will be comprised of states, armed groups, and other nonstate actors. These formal and informal groupings, to achieve their aims, employ irregular warfare tools and techniques.
- Faced with the security challenges of these hostile coalitions of actors, democratic states are beginning to foster coalitions of state and nonstate allies to oppose them.

To begin to decipher and illustrate these developments and their interplay, each of these dimensions will be examined and illustrated through the lens of real-world situations and events.

Weak/Failing States and Burgeoning Armed Groups

The proliferation of weak and failing states will be among the preponderant sources of instability over the next decade or two, at the very least. To varying degrees, these kinds of states are unable to control all their territory, maintain a monopoly over the instruments of force, or perform core functions, beginning with providing security for significant sections of their populations. Moreover, they also suffer from high degrees of

corruption. When these conditions become severe, a state's legitimacy seriously erodes and it may even vanish.

Several research and policy-oriented institutions over the last number of years have developed analytic measurements for assessing the capacity and viability of today's approximately 195 states in the world. What their analysis has found is the majority of those states are weak, failing, or failed. Here is the breakdown, drawn from those appraisals: [7]

	Democratic	Authoritarian
Strong States	40 to 45	10 to 15
Weak States	50 to 55	30 to 35
Failing/Failed States	10 to 20	

The conditions that contribute to state weakness and failure also provide the setting for armed group incubation and maturation.

Consider the regional security challenges posed by weak states in Mesoamerica—the territory stretching from Mexico through Central America and the Caribbean Basin to Colombia. Most states there are weak democracies, and that weakness manifests itself in several ways. First, large segments of the urban and rural populations of these states have little confidence in their governments. Many believe government is corrupt, incompetent, and unable to improve their lives or protect them from violence. To survive, they turn to the informal economy and are susceptible to the blandishments of criminal activities, gangs, and other types of organized crime.[8]

These states are also weak because their governments just barely control their cities; outside these urban areas, that control is much weaker. To varying degrees rural areas and even parts of cities, particularly in Colombia and Mexico, have limited government presence and authority. With few exceptions, the police and security forces of the region have limited capabilities. Salaries are low, training and equipment are insufficient, and turnover tends to be high. There is corruption from near the top on down. This has, in some instances brought the military into the security situation. But they too suffer from some of the same weaknesses prevalent in the police and other security forces.[9]

As noted above, where weak states exist, armed groups may emerge and take root.[10] Again, consider Mesoamerica. In Mexico the major armed groups—the Gulf, Tijuana, Juarez, and Sinaloa cartels—are sophisticated and powerful actors, employing thousands and effectively competing for power with the Mexican state.[11] They have well-armed, murderous para-

military forces employing hundreds of former Mexican military and policemen. In 2008 they assassinated over 5,000. The cartels corrupt and terrorize large numbers of state, municipal, and rural elected officials, police chiefs, and important local leaders so they can go about their business with relative impunity.[12]

The interplay between weak states and armed groups—the first dimension identified above—can be found in other parts of the world as well. Following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, they came together to foster a complex, protracted, irregular war that the United States neither anticipated nor was prepared to fight.[13]

Iraq's disparate sectarian, ethnic, and tribal divisions were held together by Saddam Hussein through repression. The regime was a police state. With its removal, Iraq devolved into a weak state where the central government in Baghdad had neither the legitimacy nor the power to control the diverse regions. And the United States had too few troops to establish stability and the wrong doctrine for doing so. Chaos, internal conflict, and societal breakdown ensued, as armed groups burgeoned. Insurgent, terrorist, militia, and criminal groups opposed coalition forces and also sought to weaken each other.[14]

These included Sunni "nationalist" and "Islamist" insurgents. The former were initially dominated by regime loyalists, mainly members of Saddam's security and intelligence services. They were quickly joined by fighters from Sunni tribal confederations. Sunni insurgents were also comprised of homegrown Salafi jihadists. They were joined by their internationalist counterparts when bin Laden called on these warriors to join the fight. At the same time, two major Shia armed groups emerged—Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution. Finally, armed criminal groups flourished.[15]

A third example of this weak state-armed group juncture is displayed in different parts of Nigeria to include the Niger Delta, the critical oil-producing region. Armed groups emerged there in the early 1990s due to growing tensions between foreign oil corporations, the Nigerian government, and minority ethnic groups who felt they were being exploited. This violence intensified throughout the 1990s and continues in the twenty-first century.

In spite of vast oil wealth, parts of Nigeria have several characteristics of a weak state.[16] For example, a large segment of the delta's population has little or no confidence in the government. Petroleum riches have not trickled down to the majority of the population. Official corruption is viewed as a

way of life. The people of the delta are poorer than they were in the 1960s. Population density is among the highest in the world, expanding at 3 percent per year. The same is not true of economic growth and jobs.[17]

Additionally, the Nigerian government's military and security forces are unable to achieve control across this important delta region. When combined with official neglect and environmental degradation caused by energy projects, the end result is social unrest and political violence generated by armed groups.[18]

Composed of young men dissatisfied with their inability to find jobs, armed groups began appearing in the delta in the 1990s. By the early years of the twenty-first century, the most powerful one operating there was the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, or MEND. Its attacks on oil pipelines and other oil facilities have reduced oil output considerably. MEND is much stronger than its predecessors, employing more sophisticated tactics.[19]

For example, in June 2008, MEND fast boats attacked the Shell-operated Bonga oil platform, shutting down 10 percent of Nigeria's oil production for two months. The oil platform, capable of extracting a massive 200,000 barrels of oil a day, was assumed to be outside MEND's reach due to its location 120 km offshore. This attack demonstrated a new level of power projection and put all of Nigeria's oil platforms within range of MEND forces.[20]

In early September 2008, MEND proclaimed it was launching an "oil war" throughout the Niger delta.[21] Oil companies, the Nigerian government, and the United States (Nigeria is its fifth largest supplier of oil) are greatly concerned about MEND's ability to disrupt global oil supplies.

New Interrelationships among Local, Regional, and Global Players

These developments in Mexico, Iraq, and Nigeria did not take place in isolation from the rest of the world. They cannot be characterized as local security problems. Rather, they transpired within a broader context that encompasses the second dimension of the twenty-first-century security environment—*the proliferation of actors has created new interactions and interrelationships between and among local, regional, and global players.* In each of the examples of the interplay between weak states and armed groups in Mexico, Iraq, and Nigeria, one can observe how that interplay

creates new interactions and interrelationships—both cooperative and adversarial—between local actors and other regional and global players.

Mexico's armed groups, including the Gulf, Tijuana, Juarez, and Sinaloa cartels, interact, engage, and form cooperative relationships with other forms of organized power in the Central American region. These include criminal gangs that, like the cartels, seek to undermine weak democracies in Central America to carry out their illicit activities with impunity. Perhaps the most dangerous of these gangs are the Maras.[22]

The Maras have evolved from first-generation street gangs into second-generation, business-oriented criminal groups able to control the commerce and streets of urban areas in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to third-generation, criminal organizations that have established networks extending from Central America into US cities. Through these networks the Maras have the potential to move illicit goods across borders to include the United States. And, if profitable they could make these networks available to other criminal enterprises operating out of Mesoamerica, and beyond.[23]

Armed groups in Iraq likewise have established networks and cooperative relationships with various regional actors. For example, Syria has provided a crucial logistical hub and served as a sanctuary for leaders of various Sunni armed groups. In addition, their financial networks, in part, run through Syria. For Damascus, this interaction with Sunni armed groups is a way of fighting asymmetrically with the objective of helping turn Iraq into a quagmire for the United States.[24]

There is evidence that other Arab states have established cooperative relationships with Sunni insurgents in their bid to frustrate Iranian influence in Iraq.[25] And, Tehran has sought to extend its power through engagement with both Moqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution (now known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). In the case of the former, Iran provided financial and military support to the Mahdi Army. This included a sophisticated IED that fires a molten slug capable of penetrating US armored vehicles.[26]

Interrelationships between local armed groups and elements of the international Salafi Jihad movement can be seen in Iraq. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) received support through the constituent parts of al-Qaeda's (AQ) global movement, including websites and mosques. AQ facilitators assisted in the recruitment and travel of jihadist militants to Iraq. Captured AQI records of 700 foreign fighters who entered Iraq between 2006 and 2007

revealed that 41 percent came from Saudi Arabia and 18 percent from Libya, while Syria, Yemen, Algeria, and Morocco each accounted for 6 to 8 percent. AQI also received financial assistance from wealthy sheiks from the GCC states sympathetic to radical Islamism.[27]

Beyond Iraq, an unpacking of the al-Qaeda and Salafi Jihad network provides a paramount illustration of how the interplay between weak states and armed groups fosters interrelationships between local, regional, and global actors. Al-Qaeda's founders sought to establish the organization as the vanguard of a global movement. It summoned a broad universe of like-minded extremists to become part of a global network to fight near enemies—apostate Muslim regimes—and the far enemy, the United States.

In the latter 1990s, in Afghanistan, AQ built a network of linkages with a score of national-level Islamist groups who were employing guerrilla violence and terrorism against their governments. These included ones in Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bosnia. In its Afghan sanctuary, AQ provided financial assistance, training, weapons, and spiritual guidance to their fighters. It also carried out global attacks on the United States in East Africa, Yemen, and elsewhere.[28]

Al-Qaeda's network was set back considerably with the loss of its Afghan sanctuary in 2001. To adapt, it sought to reestablish linkages with local Salafi Jihad groups, in part through creation of an Internet-based virtual sanctuary that could disseminate official communiqués, doctrinal treaties, strategy and operational documents, and training videos.[29] AQ also adapted by taking advantage of ungoverned territory to reestablish its physical sanctuary within another weak state—Pakistan.[30]

MEND's attacks on delta oil facilities reach across the globe to negatively impact the industrialized world. To undermine the Nigerian government, MEND targets the oil industry with sophisticated means. It has the resources to purchase advanced weapons, such as fast boats used to shutdown the Bonga oil platform.

How do they acquire these capabilities? From another category of nonstate actors who are likewise a part of today's security context—super-empowered individuals, groups, and institutions.[31] Operating separately, or at times through or aligned with armed groups, these micro actors have the capacity to affect the security environment by facilitating conflict and instability. Their power flows from personal wealth, financial or other material resources and technologies, access to weapons, or their ability to influence directly or serve

as a conduit for influence. In the case of MEND, this interaction was with black-market arms dealers who could deliver fast boats.

These attacks disrupt Nigerian oil production. Targets are systematically selected to stop production or delay or halt repairs. Given the impact on the world oil market, the Nigerian government has sought the help of regional and global actors. It has asked the United States and the United Kingdom to provide assistance to its military, a request to which both countries agreed.[32]

Emerging Coalitions of States, Armed Groups, and other Nonstate Actors

The first two dimensions discussed above, in turn, foster the final one—*the emergence of coalitions comprised of states, armed groups, and other nonstate actors that employ irregular tools and techniques to achieve their aims.* These pacts can range from formal to de facto coalitions to loose affiliations. And they can be found at the local, regional, and global levels.

One region that is quite illustrative of this complex interplay of state and nonstate actors is the Levant—particularly in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Israel, in and around Syria, but also encompassing Iran. The Levant is host to many interconnected actors, including de facto coalitions between states and a myriad of armed groups and their associated political movements that seek to undermine the sovereignty and legitimacy of other states in the region. This is reflected, for example, in the de facto coalition arrangements that exist among Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

Syria has formed alliances with several armed groups in the Levant to extend its power and influence. In Lebanon, which Damascus has long considered a de facto part of Syria, it does so through several means to include collaboration with Hezbollah. This arrangement also allows Syria to fight Israel through asymmetrical means.[33] Of course, Tehran remains a major collaborator and benefactor to Hezbollah, and this has been the case since its emergence in the early 1980s.[34] Indeed, it was Iranian weapons that assisted Hezbollah considerably in its short war with Israel in the summer of 2006.[35]

Support from Iran and Syria has enabled Hezbollah to strengthen dramatically its clandestine apparatus and war-fighting capabilities. As a result, it has emerged as a powerful nonstate actor throughout the Levant and beyond.[36]

In the Palestinian territories Syria has also for many years facilitated the operations of several armed groups as another way of fighting Israel through indirect means. In the past these have included the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), each of which maintains command centers in Damascus. Since the second Intifada began in 2000, Syria's most important armed group ally in the territories is Hamas, which has become the de facto ruler in Gaza. It has established various overt and covert security, intelligence, and paramilitary forces, which it employs to fight against Fatah, its Palestinian counterpart, and to attack Israel. Iran likewise uses its various clandestine organizations to indirectly provide external material support and military equipment to Hamas.[37]

Finally, a complex array of other armed movements and clandestine organizations operate in the Levant and associate with al-Qaeda and the Salafi Jihad movement. For example, in Lebanon self-styled al-Qaeda affiliates are now operating out of Palestinian refugee camps. Perhaps the best known is Fatah al-Islam, which subscribes to bin Laden's ideology of war against non-Muslims—specifically the West and Israel. In 2007, it fought pitched battles for over five months with the Lebanese army. Similar groups have emerged in the Palestinian territories, including the Army of Islam in the Gaza Strip. It is ideologically affiliated with the global jihad and has adopted its modus operandi, including the abduction of foreigners and attacks on targets identified as damaging Islamic morals such as Internet cafés.

Opposition Coalitions of Democratic States and Nonstate Actors

Faced with the security challenges of hostile coalitions and multiple actors, democratic states likewise have begun to foster coalitions of both state and nonstate allies to oppose them. In the Levant to counter these hostile forces, Israel has sought to bring together de facto coalitions of allies and partners that include both like-minded democratic states and those who in the past it has fought. Moreover, Israel has reached out to actors beyond the Levant to do so.

In terms of like-minded democratic states, most important for Israel is its long-standing partnership with the United States. But there are other democracies as well that Israel has formed security arrangements

with to counter elements of the array of hostile forces aligned against it in the Levant region. For example, while they have their differences, there are several security issues that serve as the basis for cooperation between Israel and India.[38] These include intelligence and military cooperation against Salafi Jihad terrorism. While counterterrorism remains the greatest area of cooperation between the two countries, they share other security concerns that facilitate a growing strategic relationship. For example, the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons stimulates Indian-Israeli defense and security cooperation.

Beyond like-minded democracies, Israel also engages other actors in the region. For example, it has given some assistance to Fatah, identifying and/or capturing members of the Hamas clandestine infrastructure that seeks not just to control Gaza but the West Bank as well. In doing so, Israel seeks to prevent Hamas from emerging as the dominant force in the West Bank.

Of course Israel is not the only democratic state that has sought both state and nonstate allies as a result of multiple hostile actors arrayed against it. Another case in point is Mexico. As noted earlier, Mexico is engaged in an increasingly violent internal struggle against heavily armed criminal cartels that have intimidated the public, corrupted law enforcement institutions, and created an environment of impunity to the law. The Calderon administration is confronted by criminal syndicates that have subverted state and municipal authorities and present a major danger to stability and the rule of law across Mexico.[39]

In Mexico there are two emerging coalitions vying for dominance in various parts of the country. One consists primarily of diverse armed groups that are mostly criminal.[40] They prey on the local population and exploit Mexico's geographical advantage of transit between the Caribbean, Central America, and the market of the United States. It is estimated that 20 million Americans buy illegal drugs monthly, and $15–25 billion in narco-trafficking profits are pumped back into Mexico annually in cash and arms.[41]

Most attention is focused on four major cartels and their violent battles for control of the drug trade, their penetration of Mexican politics at the state and federal levels, and their horrific paramilitary and terrorist violence against soldiers, police, and judicial officials to secure impunity.[42] They also maintain connections with narco-traffickers across Mesoamerica and beyond, even into West Africa.[43] There are also many other similar criminal

groups, less well organized, who also recruit local police and judicial authorities and terrorize the local population with systemic kidnapping, extortion, robbery, money laundering, trafficking in drugs, and smuggling of people, counterfeit and stolen goods, and arms.[44]

The temporary coalitions these criminal cartels form have few if any formal agreements. They trade with and extort one another and have created an alternative security structure and "rules" that compete with those of the government at the local level in many parts of the country and in important sectors of society. They also seek influence in Central America, in the US–Mexican border region, and in some US cities. Hostile state and nonstate actors from outside the Western Hemisphere have also sought opportunities to enter into coalitions with these armed groups to further their own interests.[45]

Another set of coalitions that supports democratic society and is opposed to criminality and its abuse of the security and police institutions of the Mexican state has begun to surface. It is led by Mexico's top elected federal officials and the governors of most states. However, as one descends the bureaucratic chain of federal, state, and municipal officials, the integrity of much of security and law enforcement personnel and institutions is more problematic and quite susceptible to intimidation and corruption.

The United States seeks to support the leaders of the Mexican federal and state security establishments and to bolster their institutions. There are a variety of formal agreements with the Mexican authorities that receive over half a billion dollars each year. Most US support is focused on neutralizing the power and programs of the major cartels and of other transnational criminal groups. The United States now provides assistance in a variety of forms—training, equipment, and information—to select units of Mexico's security establishment that are believed to be free of penetration and supportive of the rule of law.[46]

In addition to supporting current Mexican operations against major criminal organizations, the US government is also supporting Mexican efforts at police and judicial reform to ensure that Mexican law enforcement is more efficient in combating the criminal coalitions in a manner consistent with the rule of law. The United States is also supporting education at many levels of the police, judicial system, and in civil society to bolster Mexican democratic forces. For more than five years, the United States has supported partnerships of Mexican and US NGOs to prepare to significantly enhance the educational capabilities of Mexico's schools.

Through major curricula, teacher training, and other techniques, Mexican adolescents will learn about the rule of law and develop the skills to further a culture of lawfulness in their society.[47] This has recently been expanded to police education at the state and federal levels. Now all levels of police—from new recruits to commanders—are beginning to receive rule of law and integrity education.

These efforts expanded in 2008, and the Mexican government has established a multiparty, multisector governmental and nongovernmental formal coalition, including most major sectors—media, business, labor, faith-based and secular, centers of moral authority—to both enhance the security capabilities of the state and to change the culture, so it is more supportive of lawfulness. The United States likewise is encouraging partnerships and programs between US and Mexican governmental and nongovernmental organizations, both against criminality and in support of the rule of law.

But there is no unity of effort or coordination of the democratic anticriminal forces. Parts of the Mexican and the US governments and some in Europe are players. They in turn support some Mexican and US nongovernmental players. Some of the nongovernmental players collaborate with their partners across the border with no governmental involvement, mobilizing the populace and reinforcing reforms, efficiency, and commitment to ensure the Mexican states do not submit to the armed group coalitions. In the face of this lack of unity of effort and coordination, irregular conflict in Mexico will be ongoing.

The Twenty-First-Century Difference

The security paradigm of the twenty-first century, as Rupert Smith proposed in *The Utility of Force*, cannot be understood through the lens of its twentieth-century, state-centric counterpart. Not only has the global structure shifted markedly, this has been accompanied by important changes in the nature of instability, conflict, and war as well. A decade into the twenty-first century, patterns of instability and conflict can be discerned. From those developments emerge several broad dimensions.

Today, there are many more actors—armed groups, states, and other nonstate actors—employing an array of irregular means to achieve their goals. This makes for a far more complex field of engagement. Consider the conflicts taking place in and around Pakistan, Mexico, Nigeria,

Afghanistan, Lebanon, Somalia, and Yemen. The strategies and techniques employed by armed groups and the states that back them in these fights differ markedly from those used in twentieth-century wars.

Facilitating the emergence of many of these new actors is the fact that more than half the world's states are weak, failing, or failed. Their governments lack legitimacy, are often corrupt, and cannot control their territory. Armed groups, which incubate, mature, and become empowered in these weak and failing states pose an array of differing challenges. Some take the form of extremist groups with political agendas, others of criminal enterprises. Yet other weak states are threatened by multiple and diverse armed groups.

These first two developments provide opportunities for decentralized armed groups, other nonstate actors, and states to pursue their objectives at the local, national, regional, and even sometimes at the global level. And they are doing so through new types of coalitions, partnerships, and networks which are capable of challenging the United States and other democracies. The capacity of armed groups to transform and to establish linkages with state and nonstate actors greatly complicates the ability of the security services of states to understand them.

As a result, terrorists and criminal organizations are able to hit targets in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Crime cartels are players in Mexico as well as in Central and South America. Experts predict that cyber attacks or the use of biological, chemical, and even weaponized nuclear materials are on the horizon, expanding the potential geographic and casualty ranges that are in play.

Moreover, there are no front lines to identify and attack in these situations. In this type of irregular warfare, the adversary uses many nontraditional tactics—assassinations and roadside bombs, suicide attacks, bribery, propaganda in the new and old media—to slowly gain power over territory and populations. The theater of conflict includes streets, neighborhoods, villages, websites, schools, and television—settings where local governments are often weak, targets are highly vulnerable, and the effectiveness of conventional military power is diminished or irrelevant.

A New Security Agenda

Adapting to this twenty-first-century security context will be a major challenge for the United States. To do so, it will have to make a paradigm

shift in how it understands security threats, the capabilities needed to protect and defend against these challenges, and how best to organize, recruit, train, and educate to develop those capabilities. This will necessitate refocusing on the most likely irregular conflicts and challenges. Those conflicts are happening today and, for the reasons highlighted above, will persist well into the foreseeable future.

To meet and manage twenty-first-century irregular conflicts, the United States military and civilian security agencies will need to adapt and improve their instruments and capabilities. We are at one of those crossroads in history. Just as horses were sent back to the stables in 1914 and tanks became the new cavalry, a new set of tools and tactics will need to be developed and employed. In today's complex world there is no one solution, no silver bullet. Managing challenges emanating from the irregular conflict environment over the next several decades will require a new US security focus led by military, intelligence, and civilian operators.

What follows is a proposed agenda of five categories of instruments and capabilities the US will require if it is to effectively manage these irregular challenges between now and at least 2025. The good news is, establishing and building up these capabilities will not entail major additional budget commitments. In national security terms they are not big-ticket items, like advanced technology, aircraft carriers, or more troop divisions. The bad news is they are now in short supply or do not exist at all in the US inventory.

Moreover, each of the five categories of capabilities listed below, to be fully matured, will require developing new concepts of operations, requisite doctrine, tools and techniques, personnel, and the necessary authorities.

1. *Selected Army and Marine Corps units will need to be adapted, reoriented, and retrained for irregular conflict as their primary mission*. They must be prepared to support local struggles against armed groups with both kinetic and nonkinetic tools. The answer is not to add more manpower but to make different and better use of the existing forces to execute irregular missions. For example, military skills must be adapted and meshed with civilian skill sets to produce adaptable rule of law and security sector reform—which will help us win the conflict.
2. *To make sense of the new "battlefield"—which usually lacks a front line and often involves civilians as players—US and allied forces need much better intelligence at the local level.* This necessitates development of intelligence units focused on the local level. This is critical to help

distinguish who is part of an armed group, who is assisting them, who is engaging only in political dissent, and who can work effectively locally against the armed group networks. Such intelligence can be acquired if the United States develops new units able to train frontline foreign police, military and security collectors, analysts, and others to operate at the local level to complement formidable national capabilities of the United States and its allies.

3. *Security, Stability, Reconstruction, and Rule of Law/Culture of Lawfulness Teams that are professionalized in greater numbers to manage and/or prevent the outbreak of irregular conflict and to strengthen weak governments and civil society are required*. The goal is to help build governments whose legitimacy is recognized by citizens and to inculcate rule of law principles and understanding in the population. Rather than waiting for weak states to slip into critical conditions, we need to employ the twenty-first-century security equivalents of "wellness programs" to bolster and support them. Repeated full-scale military operations to rescue failing states are too costly in money and human terms for the United States to shoulder. Building a comprehensive capability will require the United States to develop systematic plans, personnel, and resources to act in diverse environments.

4. *Enhanced strategic communication management tools must be developed.* Senior US leaders, national security managers, and local implementers must have the skill sets to understand and manage their words and actions so they resonate with and influence the perceptions and behaviors of foreign audiences, especially at the local level in irregular conflict zones. The goal is ultimately to persuade local leaders and populations to change their behaviors. To do so successfully with effective tools, the US government must understand how the audience perceives the world and US actions; what their attitudes are toward the behavior change the United States is seeking; and how those attitudes have been formed. Words and actions must be gauged to be effective. If not, the goal will likely not be reached. Strategic communication is about managing these perceptions.

5. *New political advisors and mediators are needed to build coalitions in irregular conflict environments.* The United States needs professional, skilled personnel—military and civilian—capable of bringing together coalitions of actors to prevent or prevail in irregular conflicts with

adversarial coalitions. These mediators and coalition facilitators would operate with the authority, skills, and resources needed to work with both senior and local leaders and groups to enhance their effectiveness. Creative US individuals have played extraordinary roles in recent years, but professional programs do not exist in this area to build expertise and continuity or to integrate these activities into operations.

The specific configuration and deployment of these five categories of military and civilian capabilities will be determined by the local political and security context or conflict zone in which the United States is engaged. Three scenarios are envisioned.

The *first* are small advisory missions that are mainly preventative in scope and have as their objective assisting or building local capacity, particularly in fragile democracies. These missions aim to address the origins of weaknesses before they generate violent instability that might spread from local to regional levels. They should receive a high priority. The *second* involves limited US presence "on the ground" such as in Pakistan and Colombia. The *third* are major population-centric security operations against robust, armed groups in war zones where the US military is or was the main security force, as in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In closing, it should also be emphasized that these capabilities, even if developed and deployed, are not a panacea or cure-all for the irregular challenges ahead. As we stated above, in today's complex world there is no one solution, no silver bullet. But, if the United States does not invest in these capabilities now, they will not be available in specific theaters and conflicts where their presence could decrease the costs in lives and treasure and determine the outcome. They are tools that will substantially enhance the United States' ability to manage irregular conflict challenges, providing the means to protect American interests and allies in key regions of the world. SSQ

Notes

1. The article was prepared in 2010 under the auspices of the National Strategy Information Center project, "Adapting America's Security Paradigm and Security Agenda." Details and findings of the project, to include a major report released in March 2010, can be found at www.strategycenter.org. A book published from the project provides the specifics of how instability, conflict, and war in the twenty-first century have changed in significant ways; highlights how those changes challenge the United States and other democracies; and identifies specific capa-

bilities that the United States and its allies need to develop to manage and mitigate the threats emerging from this new environment.

2. Charles Krulak, "Ne Cras: Not like Yesterday," in *The Role of Naval Forces in 21st Century Operations*, eds. Richard Shultz and Robert Pfaltzgraff (Washington: Brassey's, 2000), xi–xii. Also see Krulak, "Operational Maneuver from the Sea," *Joint Force Quarterly* (Spring 1999), 79.

3. Writing just before 9/11, Anthony Lake wished that he and others in the Clinton administration had devoted more attention to what were usually tier II and III concerns in most of the Clinton years. See Anthony Lake, *Six Nightmares: Real Threats in a Dangerous World and How America Can Meet Them* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000).

4. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern Age* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2007), 5.

5. DoDD 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare*, December 2008, 2, www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300007p.pdf.

6. The International Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), in association with the University of Uppsala Data Conflict Program in Sweden, records global armed conflicts annually, dividing them into four categories: interstate, intrastate, extrastate, and internationalized internal conflict. Their database also illustrates the rise in the number of conflicts fought between states and armed groups. According to PRIO, in the 1950s these represented between a third and one half of all conflicts, whereas by the 1990s they accounted for nearly all armed conflict. This trend has continued since 9/11. Uppsala Conflict Data Program charts are available at http://www.prio.no/cwp/ArmedConflict/ and at http:///www.pcr.uu.se. Mikael Eriksson, Peter Wallensteen, and Margareta Sollenberg, "Armed Conflict, 1989–2002," *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 5 (2003): 593–607. This study documents that a total of 226 armed conflicts have been recorded for the years 1946–2002. Of these, 116 were active in the period 1989–2002, including 31 in 2002. The data for this study are drawn from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Armed Conflict webpage at www.prio.no/cwp/ArmedConflict/ and at www.pcr.uu.se. Similar trends were identified by Kalevi J. Holsti and other scholars in the 1990s. See Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Also see Zalmay Khalilzad and Ian O. Lesser, eds., *Sources of Conflict in the 21st Century: Regional Futures and U.S. Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1998), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR897.html; Ted R. Gurr, *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington: US Institute of Peace, 2000); Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Sudhir Kakar, *Colors of Violence*: *Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

7. The US Fund for Peace *2009 Failed State Index* ranks 177 states in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal dysfunction. A state's overall assessment is based on 12 social, economic, political, and military indicators. The full data set from the *Failed State Index* can be accessed at: http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=292&Itemid=452. The Brookings Institution's *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World* ranks 141 developing countries according to 20 indicators divided into four categories—economic, political, security, and social welfare. This index ranks 28 states as "critically weak" and another 28 as "weak." A third group of 28 is categorized as "states to watch" because they exhibit "significant weakness in particular areas" and "increased overall fragility." Of the 144 states ranked, 92 are failed, weak, or fragile. See Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick, *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World* (Washington: Brookings, 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/reports/2008/02_weak_states_index/02_weak_states_index.pdf.

8. See Roy Godson and Jose Manuel Vergara, *Democratic Security for the Americas: Intelligence Requirements* (Washington: National Strategy Information Center, 2008). Also see "The Failed State Index," *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2008).

9. Angel Rabasa and John E. Peters, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007). Chapters 12–13 focus specifically on ungoverned territories in the Mesoamerica region. The initial chapters, specifically chapters 1–3, focus on describing the dimensions of ungovernability and what makes these territories conducive for armed groups to establish a presence in them.

10. Different research organizations have established databases on armed groups. For example, the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Armed Conflict Database contains information on the composition, growth, and activities of over 270 armed groups (www.iiss.org). Databases have also been compiled by Jane's Information Group/Sentinel Security Assessments (www.janes.com), Global Security (www.globalsecurity.org), and the Federation of American Scientists' Intelligence Resource Program (www.fas.org/irp).

11. Colleen Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington: Congressional Research Service [CRS], February 2008); Anna Gilmore, "Pressure Mounts on the Gulf Cartel," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (January 2009); Oscar Becerra, "A to Z of Crime: Mexico's Zetas Expand Operations," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (January 2009); Ioan Grillo, "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency," *Time*, 25 January 2008; George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

12. Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels*; Oscar Becerra, "New Traffickers Struggle for Control of Mexican Drug Trade," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 September 2004; Stephen L. Mallory, *Understanding Organized Crime* (Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett Publishers, 2007); Roy Godson, ed., *Menace to Society: Political-Criminal Collaboration around the World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2003).

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14. Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), chap. 7; and Ian F. W. Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq: A Historical Perspective* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, March 2005).

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25. F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights* (March 2007), www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Mar/gauseMar07.pdf.

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31. Thomas Friedman coined the term "super-empowered individual" in his 1999 book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Random House, 2000, expanded edition). Since Friedman introduced the concept, few specialists have sought to expand on its parameters. But, there is the need to do so given the fact that today there are nonstate micro actors, to include individuals, groups, and institutions that have the capacity to impact the security environment by facilitating conflict and instability. They do so without employing their own armed capability. Rather, they have the capability to contribute to internal, regional, and international instability in a number of other indirect ways.

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45. See Godson and Vergara, *Democratic Security for the Americas*.

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