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TIME FOR A RESET?

Robert Hall *opens Pandora's Box as he considers recalibrating strategic security*

The acronym VUCA, first deployed nearly four decades ago, amply describes today's state of socio-political affairs – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. This is because of a dynamic risk environment where multiplying threats expose growing vulnerabilities. The new risk complex demands we adapt our responses. Accordingly, security on the grand scale needs to undergo a paradigm shift. Whether that shift is sufficient or swift enough to meet the challenges, only time will tell.

The re-election of President Trump has super-charged the need for change. Yet, he reflects a longer standing drift in the US and elsewhere away from the norms and behaviours of yesteryear, epitomised by traditional liberal democracies and the post-WW2 international rules-based order. The old paradigms may have avoided WW3, but they have not delivered regional stability for many countries. Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, *etc*. are evidence of a failure not only to resolve conflict, but also to observe humanitarian standards of behaviour and uphold the long-established conventions of war.

A greater reliance on a citizen reserve involving the public, private, charity, trades union, and NGO sectors makes good practical sense for national emergencies

Furthermore, the old order has not delivered a standard of prosperity that many believed they deserve. Globalisation has certainly benefited a good proportion and will remain in play for some time – albeit fragmented – but the trend today is towards transactional, populist policies with a right-leaning, nativist, even tribalistic, edge. The old East-West ideological bloc has become the new left-right ideological bloc: polarisation is everywhere as we watch many players pursue a zero-sum game in pursuit of national self-interest rather than global benefit. Pandora's box has been opened and we are entering a new world (dis)order as turbulent as any since 1945.

The changes – while hard to see a clear path through – require a new look at how strategic security is applied. The primacy of security in unstable times should not be lost. That security needs to be built around four main parameters, namely flexibility, resilience, preparation and mobilisation.

As international threats multiply and cohesiveness among allies weakens, countries will need security policies that are both agile and adaptable to cope with as many consequences as can be imagined. Part of the flexibility will be to readjust traditional thinking on how to defend sovereignty in the face of external pressures. The lines drawn on maps after two world wars are in flux as nationalistic urges gain ground. Russia's claims on Ukraine and parts of Georgia in defence of national (security) interests is now being mirrored by the 47th US President's claims on Greenland and Panama. China will be encouraged over its claims on Taiwan and the South China Sea, and other territorial claims are likely to follow; the Falklands may re-emerge.

Without the means to resist, security solutions based on compromise and concession will become the inevitable part of adaptation and survival – and may bring with it a weakening of democracy. Deterrence (by denial) may be elevated with a nuclear capability so more countries can be expected to seek this option, as well as develop hybrid or even guerrilla tactics against a larger opponent. As Gaza is proving, total security is hard to achieve. With a minimum of rules and international constraints, new and temporary partnerships may arise as circumstances dictate while others cosy up to autocrats in the hope that it protects them – again weakening democracy.

What is more, registering traditional likelihoods of specific risks on a risk matrix may no longer be valid or sufficient. Just as floods and fires are now occurring ever few years rather than over decades, then new (and old) risks may suddenly appear and spread contagion. Leaders will need to be more proactive and persuasive with their electorates if they are to be seen in command in the face of divisive politics and depleted treasuries. This will require clearer strategic thinking and better articulation of plans to ensure broad priorities are maintained in shifting or quick sands.

If agility and adaptation are marks of the future, resilience will become a trump card. As events and actions become hard to anticipate and control, it will be important to be able to bounce back – and bounce forward – from the challenges as quickly as possible. Having a plethora of plans and policies for each risk, not matter how refined, may not help if the resulting register is so thick as to be unwieldy when the danger materialises. What may be more useful is to focus on a smaller, practical library that consolidates similar risks into broad categories around which resilience plans are tailored. The result should elevate enterprise resilience management over enterprise risk management. A resilience framework is certainly a good start, but should not be at the expense of sound resilience and security strategies that cover all bases in that common library.

Part of any resilience strategy should be preparation, both bottom-up (tactical) and top-down (strategic). Preparation requires anticipation of all potential eventualities; this is foresight not prediction. Its precision will rest on good horizon scanning that should extend for at least five years, with annual reviews to massage and mould as new data emerges. The very volatility and complexity of the environment is no reason to avoid the scanning; it simply makes it more necessary, albeit more difficult.

IT WILL BE VITAL TO BE ABLE TO BOUNCE BACK FROM CHALLENGES AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE

Being prepared has both practical and psychological benefits. In the case of the former, it provides time and space to think, to work up teams and concentrate on the key issues quickly rather than on the mechanics of a plan. It also reduces the likelihood of paralysis in the moment. Within an unstable world, this will be important.

Yet, preparation may not be straight forward. Consider the use of vaccines ahead of and during an epidemic or pandemic. Vaccines have undoubtedly helped to save lives in multiple settings. However, many are sceptical of vaccines in general, some are reluctant to use traditional vaccines like MMR, Covid, influenza, *etc*. and others reject the notion of general lockdowns after the Covid-19 experience. The consequence is that some countries may well struggle to contain the next disease outbreak. That pandemic may well be around the corner. The first person in the US died in January because of an H5N1 (bird flu) viral infection. Outside America, more than 950 cases of H5N1 have so far been reported to the World Health Organisation; about half of those have resulted in death.

Hence, our security and resilience preparation – to all threats – needs to cater for anticipated shortfalls in established remedies. While the next pandemic is unlikely to be similar to the last one, our muscle memory is already lapsing and may hinder the implementation of robust actions. Isolationist or beggar-my-neighbour policies on behalf of some countries are unlikely to limit international spread. This means that preparation by countries with need to be holistic among coalitions of the willing, with as full a range of alternatives as possible, and more regular exercising to see that plans work.

The third area to consider in security modernisation in the face of a national or international challenge is the mobilisation of the

entire population. This has a strong preparatory element as such mass activation could only be achieved with careful planning and resourcing. Populations en masse must be prepared by being briefed and equipped well in advance; this is a case of alert not alarm. Civilian reserves mustered in sufficient numbers can have a significant impact on outcomes. In the pandemic of 2019-2022, over 4-million people supported the national health services in the UK. In the Winter War of 1939-40, Finland mobilised around 100,000 to supplement its standing army and held off the Soviet army for 105 days using guerrilla tactics.

COUNTRIES WILL NEED AGILE SECURITY POLICIES AS COHESIVENESS AMONG ALLIES WEAKENS

The Scandinavian countries are exemplars when it comes to whole-nation responses. While they face an obvious and direct threat from the West, they also face various hybrid threats such as broken undersea power or communication cables, not to mention a future pandemic or accidental nuclear contamination. With defence expenditures under severe strain in many countries, a greater reliance on a citizen reserve involving the public, private, charity, trades union, and NGO sectors makes good practical sense for national emergencies. This whole-of-society approach can help deliver greater homeland resilience, which in turn improves overall deterrence as it demonstrates a capability to resist external pressures.

An upcoming UK strategic defence review is expected to recast our security approach on the domestic and international arenas. It is no easy task with so many imponderables and moving parts. The incoming US administration's approach to NATO and many other treaties and obligations will set a new stage for interactions and intrigue.

What cannot be disguised are the pressures to adapt our security architecture to one that is more flexible, resilient, prepared and holistic. These come with a price tag but one that is much smaller than the price of a disaster on the day – there are ways to mitigate the costs. Flexibility means seeking novel solutions to circumstances that we may not be able to dictate or control. Resilience means looking for common ways to bounce back from challenges rather than micro-manage tailored solutions for every possible permutation. Preparation means having better antenna to warn of long and short-term dangers as well as a commitment to organise the necessary resources in advance. Holistic means assembling all parts of society in a joint response that can undertake the long haul of widespread and protracted – and may be concurrent – disruptions.

The revised security architecture needs to move beyond 'joint service' and become truly 'whole nation'. The upcoming threats to our security will affect us all – migration, food supply, communications, transportation, climate, *etc*. – and we need to have an all-embracing security stance that taps into dwindling assets for maximum benefit ●

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