OxfordResearchGroup
building bridges for global security

International Security Monthly Briefing – November 2007

FROM EVIL EMPIRE TO AXIS OF EVIL
Paul Rogers

Cold War Origins

Oxford Research Group (ORG) was founded twenty-five years ago at the height of one of the most dangerous phases of the Cold War. Ronald Reagan had been elected two years earlier and had dubbed the Warsaw Pact the "evil empire", yet the Soviet Union was in the midst of a prolonged leadership crisis. An ailing Leonid Brezhnev died in November 1982 and was followed by Yuri Andropov who survived only fifteen months in office, to be replaced in turn by Konstantin Chernenko who lasted barely a year. Only in March 1985, with Mikhail Gorbachev taking power, was some semblance of order restored.

Meanwhile, both NATO and the Warsaw Pact were engaged in a bitter arms race, with the nuclear dimension the focus of attention. The Soviet Union was deploying the new SS-20 mobile intermediate-range ballistic missile in Eastern Europe and the United States was bringing in the ground-launched cruise missile and the highly accurate Pershing 2 ballistic missile into Western Europe. The Thatcher government in Britain had decided to build a new generation of Trident missile submarines and the anti-nuclear movement was also boosted by the US decision to base cruise missiles at Greenham Common and Molesworth.

Oxford Research Group was established originally to research the processes of nuclear decision-making and to enable ordinary people to engage with those taking the decisions. It also saw a need, from the start, to facilitate dialogue between groups with radically different approaches to international relations. Throughout the mid-1980s it worked to develop knowledge and contacts, extending its work to encompass wider issues of nuclear proliferation as the Cold War began to wind down.

A common view in the 1980s was that the Cold War may have been a dangerous confrontation but nuclear weapons were so destructive that their very possession on both sides of the Cold War divide ensured stability. In other words, nuclear weapons could not be used so they deterred both sides and kept the peace. It is not an argument that goes down well in those many parts of the world in which proxy wars were fought between East and West. In Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Central America and many other places, those wars cost at least ten million lives and many tens of millions of people injured, frequently leaving behind wrecked societies.

Even in the NATO/Warsaw Pact alliances themselves, the extent of the resources devoted to the military were extraordinary. By 1985, the two groups had deployed over 62,000 nuclear weapons, and nearly 85% of all the world's military expenditure was going into this one confrontation. Over the whole period of the Cold War, there were numerous nuclear accidents, some involving releases of radiation and others with nuclear weapons lost and never recovered.

Many of the details of the crises remain largely hidden, with the notable exception of Cuba in 1962, although it is now known that in the autumn of 1983 NATO and the Warsaw Pact came close to nuclear war. At that time, just as cruise and Pershing 2 missiles were being deployed, a Soviet interceptor shot down a Korean Airlines 747 over Sakhalin Island east of Siberia, after it had entered Soviet air space, killing all those onboard and leading to a crisis in East-West relations. Shortly afterwards, NATO began a major test of its new mobile missile forces in West Germany, the *Able Archer* exercise, a test that Soviet intelligence operators believed was a preparation for a surprise attack. Soviet forces were put on immediate alert and an escalation was only avoided when NATO staff realised what was happening and scaled down the exercise.

Able Archer and other incidents were evidence of the need for dialogue and groups such as Pugwash and ORG worked hard to keep channels open. By 1987, an East-West thaw had at last begun, leading to the ground-breaking Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty that resulted in the withdrawal of the cruise, Pershing 2 and SS-20 missiles. By the end of the decade, the Cold War had eased, there was a mix of multilateral and unilateral processes under way that scaled down nuclear forces substantially, and there was even a modest peace dividend.

Arguments persist that the nuclear arms race was a necessary evil and that the West "won" the Cold War. Other views see Gorbachev as the key individual in recognising the need to break out of the "race to the death", however much he may be maligned now. What is clear, though, is that the very emphasis on the East-West confrontation had a dangerous legacy and also overshadowed two other issues that now look likely to dominate the security agenda in the coming years.

The Arms Legacy

While the nuclear forces were scaled back substantially through to the mid-1990s, and a Chemical Weapons Convention was also agreed, the sheer momentum of the Cold War arms race resulted in many further developments. Among them was the greater use of area-impact munitions – weapons such as cluster bombs, multiple rocket launchers and fuel-air explosives – that were designed specifically to cause destruction over the widest area possible. While these have been overshadowed by the parallel development of precision guided weapons ("war against property not people"), their impact in Iraq and Afghanistan has been potent and they are now proliferating across the world's armed forces.

A second Cold Wear legacy was that with cuts in defence budgets, the major arms companies were even more active in seeking to sell weapons to states outside of the old East-West axis. The Middle East, in particular, was a focus for arms sales throughout the 1990s, a trend which has continued to the present.

As for nuclear weapons, after an apparent lull, we have now moved into an era of renewed proliferation. In the 1985-95 period there appeared to be good news on this front. Argentina and Brazil ended their competitive nuclear programmes and three countries – Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus – all returned nuclear stockpiles to Russia when the Warsaw Pact broke up. South Africa went as far as dismantling its small nuclear arsenal and nuclear-free zones were also agreed across much of the world.

Since 1995, progress has reversed, and there is a real risk that the seventh decade of the nuclear age will mark a new phase of proliferation. India is now a fully-fledged nuclear weapon state, as is Pakistan. North Korea has acquired a small nuclear arsenal and Iran appears to have nuclear ambitions. If Iran does join Israel as another Middle Eastern state with nuclear weapons, then other states in the region, including Egypt and Turkey, may revise their current non-nuclear policies. The changed dynamic is having a substantial impact on western strategic thinking. The Bush administration may take a very hard line, especially with a country such as Iran, but other strategists are beginning to think about the need to move towards a nuclear-free world – a remarkable change of attitude that brings them close to the views of anti-nuclear activists.

The Majority World

Most of the security focus of the early 1980s when Oxford Research Group was first established was on the East/West divide, but this did mean that two much larger global issues were sidelined. One was the wealth-poverty divide, where little progress had been made during the 1960s and 1970s, despite the best efforts of organisations such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Just after ORG was established, the Sixth UNCTAD session took place in Belgrade in June 1983, but this had little more success than the earlier sessions in trying to bring in a fair international trading system.

Also sidelined was the issue of global environmental constraints. After the UN Human Environment Conference in Stockholm in May 1972, there had been a hope that the risk of global "limits to growth" would prompt moves towards effective environmental management, and the oil price shocks of the mid-1970s seemed to suggest that energy resource issues involved problems that would become desperately urgent. Instead, these receded into the background as free market economics came to the fore, and there was a fifteen-year gap before the development and environment issues emerged once again as part of the criticisms of globalisation of the late 1990s. This was partly due to the conspicuous failure of the globalised free market to deliver socio-economic justice. Coupled with the recognition that climate change could have disastrous impacts across the world, this meant that an integrated approach to sustainable security was going to be necessary.

Axis of Evil

The 9/11 attacks pushed that aside, as the United States and its coalition partners embarked on a world-wide war on terror not just against the al-Qaida movement but on an "axis of evil" of rogue states that replaced the "evil empire" of the Cold War era. Six years later, and after the termination of regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, over 100,000 civilians have been killed, many tens of thousands of people are detained without trial, and torture, prisoner abuse and rendition are all consequences of the coalition polices.

President Bush's war on terror was confidently expected to result in a dispersed and diminished al-Qaida and a stable pro-western Afghanistan with much greater US influence in Central Asia. It was also expected to create a pro-western Iraq with a long-term US military and political presence leading to greater security for western interests in the oil-rich region of the Persian Gulf, and an Iran which would be hugely limited in its influence and capabilities.

Instead, Afghanistan and much of western Pakistan are deeply insecure, Iraq is mired in violence, the al-Qaida movement remains active and threatening, and there is even a risk of war with Iran, given the recent extraordinary rhetoric of the Bush administration. With all of these consequences, there is just beginning to be a willingness to examine other security paradigms, even if there is little evidence of this affecting the Bush administration.

Sustainable Security

The bare outline of that approach is beginning to emerge.[*] It acknowledges from the start that one of the biggest single issues in the coming decades will be the impact of climate change. Not only is that happening faster than predicted but it is now evident that there will be massive impacts on the tropical and sub-tropical regions of the world where most people live and are dependent on locally produced food. As these regions dry out and harvests fail, the consequences in terms of social unrest and of mass migration born of desperation could be appalling.

Yet climate change is only one part of the problem, since the other major driver of insecurity is the widening wealth-poverty divide as wealth concentrates more and more in the hands of around a fifth of the world's population. With the massive and welcome improvements in education in recent decades, people on the margins are much more likely to be aware of their own marginalisation and to react strongly. Whether this is in the form of social unrest in rural China, Naxalite rebellions in India or radical social movements erupting in shanty towns across the South, these are all markers of a trend made all the more disturbing by the activities of elite communities determined to maintain the status quo.

---

[*] See, for example, Chris Abbott, Paul Rogers and John Sloboda, *Beyond Terror: The Truth About the Real Threats to Our World* (Random House, 2007).

This is an unsustainable posture yet it is much like the mindset of the Cold War. In participating in an arms race that was hugely dangerous as well as being insatiable in its demand for resources, Britain was just one country that appeared unable to escape from its own narrow outlook and seek alternative security policies. Similarly, there is now a tendency for "old thinking" to dominate. Military think tanks may well point to the potential problems of climate change and marginalisation, but their job is to protect their state. It is not their remit to see it in terms of the prevention of future conflict, especially when that is primarily a matter for other branches of government.

The end result is a demand for an increase in military spending instead of an integrated security posture rooted in sustainability. That has to have as its foundation a focus on people and communities rather than rigid security for states. It has to accept that most of the world's security problems can only be overcome by states working together, especially on the core issues of environment and development. Most of all, it has to be sustainable, in the sense that what is done in the short term does not make for much greater problems in decades to come.

In one sense, the dangers of the Cold War were obvious, and organisations such as Oxford Research Group were able to point to those dangers as they sought engagement and dialogue. There was always the risk of going over the precipice – a global nuclear war that would set the human community back centuries. Now we are in a more difficult circumstance in that it is more like a slippery slope than a precipice. Moreover, on issues such as climate change there have to be huge changes in policy in the next five to ten years to avoid problems twenty or thirty years hence. That is something that cannot easily be embraced by most political systems and is going to require an immense increase in the engagement of civil society. It will also require intensive dialogue with political, business and military leaders. In respect of the need for such dialogue, at least, little has changed since the Cold War years.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.