

CURRENT STRATEGIC TRENDS

At the start of the year 2008, the global strategic situation is determined by four trends. In the Middle East, there are some limited signs of stabilization, but sustainable political progress has so far remained elusive. On the other hand, there is a threat of regional destabilization in Southwest Asia and East Africa. As far as proliferation is concerned, tensions have relaxed to some extent, which may well only be a temporary phenomenon, however. While the forced change in Washington's foreign policy course has strengthened the capacity of the US and the West to act, the coordination of Western governance efforts with Russia and the rising powers of Asia remains a significant challenge.



US President Bush meets with Saudi King Abdullah for talks, 15 January 2008.

Reuters/Lamarque

More than six years after the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, the fight against international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction remain key strategic issues. The crises in the Middle East and in Afghanistan continue to be regional flashpoints. The process of globalization has brought about an increasing deterritorialization of threats, making the stabilization even of geographically remote crisis areas and fragile states a core task of the security policy of the Western nations. At the same time, it has given rise to global power shifts, in particular towards the Asian region.

The West is confronted with the challenge of having to increasingly coordinate its crisis management and stabilization

efforts with rising powers such as China and with Russia, which has reasserted itself with renewed confidence. At the same time, its strategic capability to act has met internal limitations repeatedly over the past years. These were due to deep-seated differences between the transatlantic partners, the US tendency towards unilateral policies, and difficult transformation processes within the Euro-Atlantic security institutions.

Although the strategic picture has not fundamentally changed compared to the previous year, there have been several notable developments in the past months. These will be presented in the following in terms of four trends, with a view to assessing their strategic relevance.

Improved security situation in Iraq

First of all, for the first time in years, there are some limited signs of stabilization in the key crises of the Middle East. This is true for the Iraq conflict and the disagreement over Iran's nuclear program, but also for the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is uncertain how stable these developments will turn out to be, however, since the preconditions for politically sustainable solutions are still far from being met.

In Iraq, the security situation has improved due to several factors. First of all, the Bush administration changed its counter-insurgency strategy in the spring of 2007. Instead of operating primarily from their bases with use of massive force against the enemy, the US troops today operate alongside Iraqi soldiers from Joint Security Stations, with priority given to the protection of the population. Under this plan, in order to be able to provide a greater local presence, Bush decided against massive domestic resistance to increase the number of troops by 30,000 to a total of 162,000.

Secondly, several Sunni tribal leaders have decided to cooperate with the US in combating al-Qaida. Their newly founded, US-financed Concerned Local Citizens militias have proven to be effective, not least in the area of intelligence-gathering. Third, there has been progress in training Iraqi security forces. Fourth, these factors have contributed to the declaration of a ceasefire by the Shi'ite militias of Moqtada al-Sadr.

However, Iraq remains deeply divided along religious and ethnic lines, and the central government is still extremely fragile. Apart from a partial revision of the De-Ba'athification Law of 2003, the security gains have hardly resulted in political progress so far. A division of power and reconciliation between Sunnis and Shi'ites has failed to materialize, as has a settlement on the distribution of oil revenues and on the federal character of the state. It therefore remains to be seen whether stabilization will continue after a new withdrawal of US troops, or whether the "surge" will turn out to be no more than a temporary tactical success.

De-escalation with Iran

A limited de-escalation can also be noted in the conflict over Iran's nuclear ambitions. This is due to a reassessment of the Iranian nuclear weapons program by the US intelligence services. The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of December 2007 judged "with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program" and has not resumed it since. While it is assumed that Iran continues to reserve the option of nuclear armament, an Iranian nuclear weapon is not expected to be technically feasible in the next years.

Due to the political impact of the NIE, a US military strike against Iran is off the table for the time being. Nor does the imposition of significantly tightened sanctions against Tehran seem feasible at this point. Instead, there are increasing demands for a US-Iranian dialog. It is questionable whether a sustainable détente will come about, however. The resurgence of Iran to a regional power status, which was favored by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and of the Taliban, has aggravated the strategic rivalry between Tehran and Washington. Furthermore, the NIE has been questioned by well-known proliferation experts and members of the intelligence services in the UK and France, for example. Iran's hide-and-seek game concerning its civilian nuclear program – which was not evaluated in the NIE –, its insistence on autonomous enrichment of uranium, and the associated danger of using fissile material for military purposes might trigger a new round of escalation in the nuclear conflict.

A fragile peace process in the Middle East

The peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, which was re-launched at the Annapolis Middle East conference

Improved security situation in Iraq					
	Nov 2003	Nov 2004	Nov 2005	Nov 2006	Nov 2007
Attacks per day	35	85	95	180	80
Civilian victims	700	2,650	1,650	3,450	650
US troops killed	82	137	84	69	40
Iraqi security forces killed	65	65	176	123	89
US troops / allies (in thousands)	123 / 24	138 / 24	160 / 23	140 / 18	162 / 12

Source: The Brookings Institution

in November 2007, also marks a positive development. Final status talks are being held again for the first time after years of violence as part of a more dynamic Middle East policy by the Bush administration, which is hoping for a peace treaty by the end of 2008 and aims to adopt an arbitrator role in the implementation of the Road Map to Peace.

But here too, it does not appear as if the political conditions for a solution of the conflict are being met. The Islamist Hamas movement, which had won the Palestinian elections in the spring of 2006 and has been in control of the Gaza Strip since June 2007, does not accept a two-state solution and rejects the peace process. For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, already weak domestically, is confronted with great resistance to the concessions necessary for the creation of a Palestinian state and is more likely, for the time being, to be interested in the peace process itself than in achieving substantial progress. It remains questionable whether the Bush administration is prepared and able to sway the parties to the conflict to make concessions.

No peace deal is in sight with Syria and Lebanon, either. In Beirut, the political institutions have been paralyzed since the Islamist Hezbollah Party left the government in November 2006. The possibility should not be excluded that the power struggle between the pro-Western government coalition and the pro-Syrian opposition may deteriorate into a new civil war. Hezbollah's connections to Iran are indicative of the way in which the individual crises in the Middle East overlap, which is an additional factor obstructing sustainable conflict resolution.

Destabilization in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Contrary to the Middle East, where some positive developments can currently

be identified, Southwest Asia and East Africa are experiencing increasing destabilization. In Afghanistan, the extremist Muslim Taliban movement is resurgent. According to UN reports, its area of influence has increased by up to 70 per cent in 2007. Together with local warlords and the resurgent al-Qaida network, the Taliban are waging asymmetric war against the Afghan government and the international military forces. The number of international coalition soldiers killed in the past year reached a new record level of 232, and the total since 2001 is now over 750. While some of the allies have increased their troop levels in the country, with the total number of foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan now at 55,000, such measures have had no measurable effect so far.

There are multiple reasons for this lack of progress. Some members of the coalition have imposed far-reaching operational restrictions on their troops, and refuse to engage in operations in the southern provinces, where the fighting is particularly fierce. Instead of a common strategy combining counterinsurgency and counterterrorism with stabilization and reconstruction measures, the allies are following various different approaches. Also, the conflict has expanded to the inaccessible North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, which is partially controlled by militant Muslim groups and serves as a zone of retreat for the Taliban. This situation is further aggravated by delays in the establishment of Afghan security forces and state institutions. The central government in Kabul is weak and corruption-ridden. Furthermore, the West has not found a way to reduce the opium production that dominates the Afghan economy.

In view of the fact that the security situation in Pakistan has also deteriorated, and in part due to the developments in Afghanistan, Southwest Asia appears to be descending into a region-wide crisis.

The Pakistani military, which has long instrumentalized the religious extremists for its own purposes in Afghanistan and Kashmir, seems to have lost control over them. The wave of violence that has swept the country over the past months and culminated in last month's assassination of opposition politician Benazir Bhutto, as well as the proclamation of a state of emergency in November 2007 in order to consolidate his power base, have undermined the position and legitimacy of President Pervez Musharraf. The US, which supports Pakistan as a key ally in its "war on terror" with up to US\$1 billion per year, is confronted today with a dilemma: If it pushes for democracy, nuclear power Pakistan might descend into even further instability, given the weak state of the opposition. If the US continues to support Musharraf's authoritarian regime, the religious extremists will continue to win support.

Crisis in the East African region

Regional tendencies towards destabilization are also traceable in East Africa. Kenya was long regarded as a regional "anchor state" due to its political stability, its economic power, and its proximity to crisis regions. However, since the contested elections in December 2007, the country has been thrown into a profound crisis. Weak institutions, regional imbalances, and ethnic tensions have contributed to a situation where the struggle for the powerful presidency is accompanied by outbreaks of violence approximating civil war.

If the situation should escalate further, that would also weaken Kenya's important role as a stabilizing force in Sudan and Somalia. This is all the more worrisome because tensions are running high in both of these states. The conflict over Darfur in western Sudan, which has caused an estimated 400,000 deaths since 2003, continues to smolder and has spread to the border region in neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic. It remains to be seen whether the peacekeeping troops of the UN, the African Union, and the EU will manage to contain the conflict and protect the civilian population. In Somalia, there are still hardly any signs of a functioning state on the first anniversary of the invasion of Ethiopian troops at the turn of the year 2006/2007. This is particularly worrisome as militant Muslim groups close to al-Qaida have established their own power base there.

The strategic importance of Africa has increased in view of the many conflict

hot spots, the entrenchment of Islamist terrorism especially in East Africa, and the abundance of resources. The US military has responded to this development by building up a new AFRICOM regional command since October 2007. The extent to which the increasing presence of energy-hungry China will have a negative effect on the stabilization and development efforts of the West remains to be seen.

Nonproliferation: Successes and question marks

In addition to these regional developments, a third trend concerns the functional level of nonproliferation. In the context of the proliferation hot spots of Iran and North Korea, the recent months have witnessed a certain degree of relaxation. While in the case of Iran there are intelligence reports indicating a cessation of the nuclear arms program, North Korea agreed in February 2007 to an action plan for incremental denuclearization. Pyongyang has already undertaken initial verified measures to this effect. However, it is not yet clear whether the authoritarian regime will actually abide by its obligations. The fact that it failed to meet the deadline in late 2007 to disclose all of its nuclear activities suggests that a rapid denuclearization of North Korea should not be expected. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that Pyongyang will return to its long-established tactics of extorting further concessions through violations of agreements.

There are other reasons to believe that the problems of proliferation will persist as one of the central strategic challenges. The renaissance of nuclear energy increases the danger of proliferation. In the Middle East, several states have announced their decision to rely on nuclear energy, with Egypt, for example, intending to develop a closed nuclear fuel cycle. At the same time, the International Atomic Energy Agency seems unprepared to take on additional verification tasks. The future of the Nonproliferation Treaty is also unclear. Measures for enforcing the proliferation norm and improved verification standards are just as controversial as a revision of the opt-out clause, the right to enrich uranium autonomously, and the assessment of disarmament measures on the part of the official nuclear powers.

US policy shift

Finally, an important fourth trend concerns the recent changes in US foreign policy, which have improved the capa-

city of Washington and the West to meet some of the pressing security challenges. The failure of the neoconservative agenda has not only had consequences in terms of personnel in Washington, but has also compelled corrections in the course of US foreign policy. Some of the positive developments outlined above, such as the Annapolis Process and the initiation of North Korea's denuclearization, are due, among other factors, to a US return to a foreign policy guided by realism. Principles such as diplomacy, alliance formation, and containment have regained importance within US strategy. The continuing skepticism towards dialog with Iran, Syria, and Islamist movements such as Hamas is an indicator, however, that this is only a partial realignment of US foreign policy and not a paradigm shift.

Even if conditions for an intensification of transatlantic cooperation have improved, the challenges to the strategic abilities of the West remain huge. NATO is confronted with internal strains due to the difficulties in Afghanistan, the lack of agreement concerning its future strategic alignment, and the US plans for strategic missile defense in Europe. The EU, on the other hand, is confronted in Chad and especially in Kosovo with what may be the biggest challenges in the brief history of European Defence and Security Policy. Moreover, as the case of Kosovo has illustrated, in an increasingly multipolar global order it is not just the difficult search for intra-Western cohesion but also, and increasingly, the challenge of coordinating Western positions with other actors that may hinder effective crisis management.

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