The international scenario of terrorism

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The last century has been characterized by several events that have deeply influenced the geopolitical scenario and the evolution of modern society. Aside from natural events, the First and Second World Wars shaped international equilibrium. At the price of millions of deaths, Western societies, since the end of the 1940s, have begun a virtuous path to peace, paying attention to the industrial reconstruction, which in the postwar period represented exceptional support for the economies of the defeated nations. Despite all of this, the world soon became divided between two superpowers, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and for this reason for four decades the global balance of power was unstable. The Cold War was an always brewing conflict that created global suspense: a prolonged period that witnessed an indirect conflict between these two countries through distanced client wars, trying to affirm and promote opposite values and ideologies. This bipolar period was also characterized as the two sides "playing by the rules"—clear, precise, and binding, a dispute where the enemy was well-defined. The two superpowers established limits on the tensions born from other regional crises, considering themselves arbiters among opponents aligned with one group or another. As a consequence, the armed forces of both blocks developed different war doctrines, oriented by the historical moment and the perceived threat.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 reshaped the interests of the Europe, which were gradually emancipated from the fear of a Russian invasion. Thus, a redefinition of the military structure as a whole took place because the commanders in chief became aware of their inadequacy to face the new challenges. The failure of the communist ideology had two consequences: (1) remodulation of the role of the military, which in the past included surveillance and nuclear and conventional deterrence; and (2) a growing confusion, especially related to new and unpredictable scenarios.

In the meanwhile, since the 1970s, terrorist groups well-rooted in different European nations progressively abandoned their endogenous characteristics and adopted a transnational approach based on common ideologies. The Brigate Rosse (BR) in Italy, the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) in Germany, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Ireland, and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain, in their own ways, shook the civil consciousness by pursuing military agendas dictated by various ideologies. Their common element was the fight against the institutions of the state. However, the rise of these groups (just a few examples of the terrorist galaxy) represented the beginning of a long season of violence and blood, which were confronted with individual strategies (which yielded various results) by each state.

The first escalation in terms of the visibility and efficiency of terrorism was represented by the appearance on the international scene of the Islamist group in the powderkeg of the Middle East. The first attack carried out by terrorists was the massacre at the Munich Olympics in 1972, when Fedayyin commandos from the Black September terrorist organization broke into the athletes’ housing and killed two Israelis, leading to a firefight with German police that brought on the death of all the Israeli hostages.

The media exposure and consequent social effect inspired the rise and proliferation of other groups throughout the world. With the ancient contraposition of Sunni and Shia believers, the Middle East became the terror laboratory, an authentic school. Moreover, the process of decolonization in several African countries represented a threat due to the increase in the number of new hostile forces. In that scenario, while the bipolar contraposition of the superpowers still exists, despite the beginning of a new season characterized by the dialogue between East and West, antiterrorist defence is called upon to answer the new threat. Endogenous terrorism...
is reinforced by similar organizations located in other nations, assuming wider regional connotations and rendering more difficult the preventive and repressive actions of investigative institutions.

Through the Camp David Accords of 1978, the process of building pace in the Middle East changed thanks to the end of the state of war between Israel and Egypt. Nevertheless, this historical agreement left several crisis situations unsolved, first and foremost the Lebanese and Palestinian situations, both tightly linked to the dynamic of the Syrian regime, a very discussed topic these days. However, the Camp David Accords embraced an innovative opportunity for a military instrument. The Multinational Force and Observers represent the first experiment of a "coalition of the willing." Italy discovered its vocation for foreign military missions, earning appreciation for their first military intervention in Lebanon led by General Angioni. It was a fundamental step in the acquisition of efficacy and experience useful for the consequent mission in the Persian Gulf.

However, Western nations are not the only peace-keeping actors. In fact, the Soviet Union in 1979 tried a military experiment by invading Afghanistan to overthrow President Amin and impose a government led by Babrak Karmal. Moscow never thought that this would become the “Soviet Vietnam.” Taking into account their military superiority, the Kremlin planned a sort of blitzkrieg, absolutely sure that they were able to defeat the Afghan fighters. Needless to say, it was not that simple, and that gave the chance for Russian leaders to change their initial intentions and abandon the mission. Nevertheless, the international community is still paying a great price for that war. The Afghan resistance was supported by nations that had the intention to weaken the Soviet Union by prolonging this proxy war. The mujahedin received unexpected support from different external actors who supplied arms, training, and equipment. Once the Afghan conflict came to its conclusion, it left in its wake some groups of resistance fighters influenced by radical Islamist ideology. These terrorist groups were trained through specific techniques that caused great difficulties for the better-equipped military forces, especially thanks to their better knowledge of the hostile territory. It was the fatherland of Al Qaeda, who represented a new phenomenon within the international panorama. It is a transregional organization that is constantly spreading and growing, thanks to the spontaneous affiliation of terrorist groups that share their ideology and goals. This new actor arose in a specific historical moment characterized by the disaggregation of the Soviet Union and the rise of new crisis sites and such failed states as Somalia. Today these organizations appear as secondary actors, because terrorism is now most dramatically linked with the Islamic State (or Daesh). The real power of this organization comes from its extraordinary media savvy, not its military capabilities. Techniques of attack, settled in the European capitals, belong to the tradition of Al Qaeda. Their tactics are organized in a simple fashion, and their efficacy derives from their willingness to sacrifice their lives, following religious rules erroneously derived from Islamic precepts. The simplicity of their attacks is supported by obsessive media exposure, which greatly magnifies their real achievements. Due to the fact that young Muslims, often born in the West, do not feel integrated in their societies and seek to find a sense of belonging in their ancient origins. Indeed, they have a vast supply of recruits from which to draw.

Prevention and repression of terrorism require capabilities that need to be trained within a short period of time. For this reason, it is fundamental to draw on the experience of military professionals who worked in the area where terrorism was born. The asymmetric techniques of terrorist attacks used by insurgents have caused such a huge number of victims, our military has allied itself with those of other countries (some strange bedfellows). The analysis of techniques and tactics led us to an awareness that the best training, as well as the best equipment, have next to no influence against enemies who see death as the supreme sacrifice that will connect them with their god and transport them to paradise.

Those scenarios have radically changed all the long-consolidated doctrines employed during the Cold War. The enemy is no longer conventional, and neither are their armaments. Our doctrines should be adaptive and predictive. It is upon this framework that intelligence work has its floor. Constant activity in making relationships and building multicultural acceptance constitute the anthropological approach to the “operative theatre.” The challenge is continuous and multipolar. Conflicts are fought on mountains, in deserts, in Western capitals, and in cyberspace, a limitless expanse where hunting requires creativity, human innovation, and technical tools.

Nowadays, the military arm of industrialized nations is moving toward this dimension, where one cannot smell the fear of the war but where a loss can cost thousands of lives. We now almost look back at the Cold War with a melancholic nostalgia. Four decades ago, soldiers wearing a uniform were easily identifiable as the enemy. The paradox is that the old enemy and we now face the same threat.

Disclosures

Admiral Marzano has nothing to disclose.