

America's shiver

Paul Rogers

We first wrote about Full Spectrum Dominance back in 2001, before 9/11 (see Spokesman 71, entitled Full Spectrum Absurdity). Ten years on, that mindset apparently persists amongst certain circles in the United States, as some of the leaked diplomatic cables indicate. Paul Rogers sifts the evidence. Professor Rogers' book, Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century, is now in its third edition (Pluto Press).

The hacked United States diplomatic missives reveal both the vast ambition and the new vulnerabilities of the world's superpower.

Among the most compelling nuggets of information contained in the batch of United States diplomatic documents released by WikiLeaks, and published in leading international newspapers, is the list of installations in more than fifty countries which the State Department in Washington deems to be a US security concern. Some of the locations seem obvious (major oil-and-gas processing-plants and pipeline terminuses, for example); but others are far harder to fit any evident national-security frame (such as an Australian pharmaceutical plant specialising in anti-snake-venom treatments, and cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo).

But even the more unlikely sites are relevant to a country that sees itself as the world's sole superpower with interests across the globe. The anti-snake-venom plant in Australia almost certainly has the expertise and equipment to make antidotes to other toxins, and this could be highly significant in the event of a biological-warfare threat.

The cobalt-mines around Kolwezi and Mutshatsha in the southern DRC extract the world's most important deposits of cobalt ores, and ferro-alloys containing cobalt have the specific property of retaining their shape at very high temperatures. They are therefore much in demand for the guidance-vanes of missile-engines and other elements of modern weapons-systems.

The more surprising elements of the list as much as the expected ones thus illustrate

the continued reach of the United States' strategic and security ambitions. But they also reveal something more: its new vulnerabilities. The increased inter-state competition across much of the global south from China and other rising states is one, familiar, source of these; another and perhaps less visible source is the challenge posed by insurgent groups to these prime targets. Indeed, central Africa may be a good place to begin to track this superpower dilemma.

A wider trend

In 1977-78, this region of what was then Zaire – ruled by the authoritarian (and west-supported) Mobutu Seso Soko – was a scene of severe violence as forces of the central government in Kinshasa fought to prevent rebel groups taking control of the mines. The insurgents were supported from Soviet bloc countries, especially East Germany, making this also one of the characteristic proxy wars of the Cold-War era. The crisis became so serious that Franco-Belgian paratroopers (supported by Nato) were airlifted to the region to take control of the mines; the contingent, having secured the objective, then handed over to a French-organised Inter-African Force.

Such armed competition over mineral resources both extended beyond the Cold War and acquired new dimensions – among them the capacity and will of paramilitary groups to target sites of great economic value or symbolism to the power-structures they seek to undermine.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the Tamil Tigers guerrilla group attacked an oil refinery, the international airport and many other such sites in the 1990s; its biggest operation was a massive truck-bombing of Colombo's central bank, in January 1996, that killed over 100 people and injured 1,400 as well as damaging both much of the capital's business district and business confidence overall.

A further significant example in this decade is the Provisional IRA's decision to switch the focus of its armed campaign in the early 1990s in the direction of a full-tilt assault against the City of London, at the very time when the latter was competing vigorously with Frankfurt to be Europe's financial hub. A series of bombs in the heart of the extended district – in Bishopsgate, Baltic Exchange and Canary Wharf – was the result; there were also numerous attacks on transport targets including rail terminuses, motorways and airports. The government of the day, led by John Major as Prime Minister (1990-97), never publicly acknowledged the full impact of the IRA's strategic shift; but at the centre of power there was clear recognition of the serious dangers of such 'spectaculars'. The result

was to fuel the development of an incipient 'peace process' in Northern Ireland involving all leading actors, initially by Major's Conservative Government but with more focus when Tony Blair's New Labour came to power in May 2007.

The completion of this process, in the form of the Belfast Agreement of 1998, and subsequent events (albeit breakaway or 'dissident' factions claiming the IRA mantle persist in efforts to continue the struggle) took place just as the arc of insurgency was rising elsewhere. In the 2000s, the age of 'war on terror', this form of economic conflict has become part of the armoury of al Qaeda and its affiliates; examples include the attack on the French tanker *Limburg* off the coast of Yemen, on 6 October 2002, and the bombing of the Saudi oil-processing plant at Abqaiq, on 24 February 2006. At the height of the Iraq insurgency, in 2004-07, repeated attacks on oil facilities sabotaged US efforts to develop this asset and to establish control over the country.

There are other cases across the world, perpetrated by groups (such as India's Naxalites) with a quite different ideological character and political motive. A series of low-cost but high-impact attacks on Mexico's oil-and-gas pipelines by the small but effective *Ejército Popular Revolucionario* (Popular Revolutionary Army / EJR), in 2007, would also come into this category.

A real grasp

The wider trend evident here since the 1990s is the ability of paramilitary groups in different parts of the world to recognise the weak points of organised commercial and financial operations and, on many occasions, to target them. These disparate groups are not themselves coordinated or supportive of a single cause, but the body of experience they have separately developed (much of which can be widely accessed and shared across the internet) means that a common understanding of the vulnerabilities of urban-industrial societies is possible.

This trend, and its wider political context, helps explain the desire of the United States State Department to collect data on potential strategic targets in more than fifty countries. The US has faced many problems in the decade of 'war on terror', and its overriding focus on military combat has, in addition, handicapped its ability to cope with emerging issues such as the rise of China as a major economic power. Yet the inner nexus of power in Washington maintains an unbending commitment to the idea of the 'new American century', and the status of the United States as the world's only military superpower.

This ambition is manifested in the effort to secure 'full-spectrum dominance' using conventional military forces; the attempt to exert control of space through US Space Command's *Vision for 2020*; and a capacity to project power far in excess of any other state. For all its extraordinary strength and scale, however, the project is as yet unable to prevent sub-state actors from launching damaging assaults and thus maximising the benefits of 'asymmetrical war'.

The insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have already hugely constrained American forces and their coalition partners; both conflicts, too, have elements of an inter-state resource war of the kind familiar from the Cold War period. But in addition to such 'classic' geopolitical and geo-strategic concerns, the United States now faces a further deep underlying worry: that paramilitary groups worldwide are ever more aware that their most effective impact might come less from laying improvised-explosive devices (IEDs) to disable small military units than by striking laterally at major nodes of economic activity.

This process may still be in its early stages. But that is precisely the importance of the diplomatic list of security-related sites released by Wikileaks. The United States, *the* world power, has interests everywhere – and in the new conditions of global politics, conflict, and technology, these are everywhere shadowed by new vulnerabilities. The cables show that Hillary Clinton's State Department has a real grasp of this reality. How the United States responds to it will help define the character of the next decade and beyond.

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