From 11/9 to 9/11: Continuity or Change in International Politics?

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Resumo

Desde o choque do ataque terrorista aos Estados Unidos da América em 11 de Setembro de 2001, espalhou-se a crença de que o mundo não é mais o mesmo e que o carácter da política e segurança internacionais se alteraram radicalmente. O conteúdo deste artigo visa mostrar que, embora a segurança e a procura da estabilidade a longo termo permaneçam o supremo objectivo para todas as sociedades, é apenas a definição e percepção da noção de segurança que sofreram uma reapreciação significativa, mas esta mudança fundamental verificou-se efectivamente antes do 11 de Setembro com o fim da Guerra Fria, embora não fosse realmente discernida ou completamente reconhecida. No entanto, os ataques terroristas à Costa Leste dos Estados Unidos da América compeliram inegavelmente a comunidade internacional a reconhecer que ameaças veladas foram substituídas por consideração de " risco" e "desafios" que o ambiente internacional se baseia não já na gestão da segurança mas na gestão da insegurança. Dimensões transnacionais assumiram um perfil saliente nas avaliações da sociedade como considerações de estabilidade e segurança e, nesta perspectiva, o 11 de Setembro levou os Estados Unidos da América a adoptar uma abordagem mais radical e de não compromisso na sua política externa e de defesa, a ter em conta a nova definição de segurança e a mais difusa noção dos desafios contemporâneos, incluindo as ameaças assimétricas.

Abstract

Since the shock from the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes on the USA, the widespread belief is that the world is no longer the same and that the character of international politics and of security have radically evolved. The contention of this article is that, while security and the search for long-term stability remain for all societies the paramount objective, it is only the definition and perception of the notion of security that have undergone a significant reappraisal, but this fundamental shift actually took place prior to 9/11 with the end of the Cold War, even though it was not truly discerned or fully acknowledged. Nevertheless, the terror strikes on the US East Coast have undeniably compelled the international community to realise that overt threats have been replaced by considerations of "risks" and "challenges" and that the international environment is based no longer on the management of security but on the management of insecurity. Transnational dimensions have assumed a salient profile in societal evaluations as considerations of stability and security and in this perspective, 9/11 has led the USA to adopt a more radical and uncompromising approach in its foreign and defence policy, to take account of the new definition of security and of the more diffuse notion of contemporary challenges, including assymetrical threats.

> "The story of the human race is war. Except for brief and precarious interludes, there has never been peace in the world."
>
> *Winston Churchill*

Two words, September Eleventh, more than any other, have shaped international consciousness over the last twenty-six months, and their impact has been felt in all aspects of global relations, from politics to the business world and from large-scale international commercial decisions to the character of individual affective human relations – including with a reappraisal in the balance between social and family obligations and friendships. Therefore, as might be expected, it would appear impossible, nowadays, to address any contemporary issue of substantive character, let alone dimensions of international politics or security, without failing to mention the impact and importance that the dramatic events in New York and Washington have had and will continue to have for years to come.

"Since September 11th" has become part of the global lexis, and with it the consideration that "since September 11 the world is no longer the same"; the date is perceived as the Big Bang of the new Century and a milestone in human affairs. The terrorist destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York (the most media-covered terror act in History) and the attack on the Pentagon, is undoubtedly a milestone in international affairs – that is, an event that has marked the times – but on a par with others whose significance continue to shape the current dynamics of international affairs – from the dropping of the A-bomb in August 1945, to the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the Munich Olympics and the international prominence of terrorism in 1972, the emergence of oil as a weapon in 1973, the rise of political Islam in 1979, Chernobyl and the importance of the undisputed recognition of a political dimension for the environment in 1986 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The shocking impact of the events of September 11 has in effect already led to a material transformation of outlooks in security and defence policies at national and international levels (heightened levels of internal security and monitoring, more thorough controls at borders, greater emphasis on intelligence gathering, pre-emptive foreign engagements and a greater stress on collective measures). However, without wanting in any way to diminish the importance and tragic character of the events of 9/11 or their lasting significance for international politics, I would contend that the world has not changed since September 11 and that, contrary to popular opinions, continuity rather than change remains the hallmark of the world today. September 11, 2001, has emphasized

the plural character of security, but has not created it; in fact of more significance in this context is November 9, 1989 – or 11/9 – when in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall the more plural or diffuse character of international security was highlighted. Moreover, from an historic perspective, it is somewhat premature to assess whether after less that two years from the occurrence of a particular event, however momentous it may have appeared at the time, the character of human affairs has radically changed.

Adopting a longer term perspective, if change has occurred in recent years, it has fundamentally occurred in two different respects: in the dynamics of international interactions which have assumed a faster pace at societal levels (mobile phones are only one manifestation of this trend; equally transnational diseases may spread faster today, but are not a new phenomenon) and in their projection onto a far larger international dimension – the fact that contemporary challenges facing societies are nowadays no longer domestic or regional but global; but this reality predates September 11, 2001.

International politics, as Raymond Aron once said, still remains the arena of the soldier and the diplomat. Other actors, from multinationals and NGOs to terrorists, may walk onto it and affect or influence its proceedings quite significantly, but while the nature of international interactions may have changed, the fundamental character of international politics so far remains the same – unstable, dangerous, anarchic. The nature of economic, social, political, scientific and military interactions, their forms of expression (indeed much like fashions) may have evolved, assumed new manifestations or changed down the ages, but the character of international and human affairs has not. We may live longer, healthier and, at least for some in societies across parts of the globe, with less worries or daily hardships than our predecessors, but we still struggle to achieve the same broad goals as our forefathers. We, like our ancestors, still want the same things and fear the same fears. War has not disappeared from international affairs and the search for security, peace, stability and for spiritual and material values – love, fame, success, power – has not altered; it is only the manifestations or aspects that these various dimensions can take that may have changed or has actually changed.

Equally, the need for alliances, military preparedness, diplomatic skills and intelligence-gathering remain as valid today as they were in former times. Moreover, terrorism, and including also international terrorism, is not a new phenomenon, but has longstanding historic antecedents; while at least for Western Europe the phenomenon of terrorism has already manifested itself with significant and deadly force for several

decades. Therefore, contrary to expectations, the new post-Cold War international environment has not generated either an immediate peace dividend for the global community, or the dawn of a new era of international stability and security. The optimistic vision of a New World Order was ahistorical and also ignored that Europe long preceded the Cold War. In fact, if the old order may be dead, the new order is unable to be born and not only is war still present as a feature of the state system but instability may assume forms other than direct military confrontation. Societies' search for security remains the paramount endeavour.

Yet complex changes are never complete breaks from the past; evolutionary and revolutionary changes coexist, each shaping the other. Thus globalisation may have eroded the primacy of states but it has not replaced the state-system. Thus, the old belief that if peace is sought, you must prepare for war may not meet with the approval of many in contemporary societies but, in essence, this maxim remains as valid and essential today to forestall adverse situations as it was when it was first enunciated. War Ministries may have been replaced by Defence Ministries, but their primary mission of ensuring the security and territorial integrity of states with appropriate strategies has not changed while, at present, Washington's new doctrine of pre-emptive action, expounded following the shock it experienced in realising that the US mainland did not lie in splendid isolation from the world's problems, merely represents for the US a new expression of this vision.

Contemporary societies still need to understand and prepare for challenges ahead to ensure their long-term stability and prosperity. Their nature may have changed – from massed armies to mechanised divisions, to missiles and satellite-guided weapons and now to the instability posed by faceless assymetrical threats or even non-military dimensions of instability, from the environment to religious fundamentalism – but their character has not. Dynamics on the international stage therefore provide aspects both of continuity and of change that must be acknowledged in security evaluations. A greater flexibility is required, nowadays, in strategies designed to ensure the continued stability and security of geographic regions, away from traditional concepts of deterrence and war-fighting and rather encompassing the enduring complexity in the character of international politics.

The prevailing evolution of international politics lies in that, nowadays, security and defence policies have identified and targeted areas that were previously deemed of lesser or secondary importance – the area of so-called soft politics, from the rights of minorities to religion and from the environment to human rights, that the Realist

approach to International Relations could, and did, regard as being of lesser importance compared to the issue of military forces and alliances.

This analytical development however dates back to the end of the Cold War, and is not the outcome of the terror of 9/11. As former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stressed at the London Conference in 1992, convened to bring order to the Yugoslav chaos, "an international era has just ended. With its passing, a dimension of fear has departed, but a dimension of stability has disappeared as well. No problem of today, however familiar its form, is exactly as the problem of the past era. The closing of the Cold War has opened a Pandora's box of causes and conflicts that had been kept down by the ideological struggle of that era". Security since November 1989, and consequently more so since September 2001, has ceased to be envisaged exclusively as a function of military factors; rather, it is seen as depending on events that may impact on the stability and quality of life of national constituencies.

What this evolution has meant for international relations in the context of foreign and security policy is that now, more than ever before, the arena of international politics approximates the sporting arena; international politics has assumed the character of competitive sports – it is always only the next challenge or confrontation that counts. The last one is over; you do not win something because you won it in the past.

This perception means that societies' necessity for readiness or vigilance has not diminished, and that, although the nature of the threat may be different from the past, they have been compelled into finding an adequate way in which to address and respond to the new range of political challenges. They are political in that they require an authoritative allocation of values by policy-making processes.

Thus, the main difference between the Cold War, when the anxiety was caused by Soviet political and military preponderance and present times, for free societies in Europe and the US, is that the struggle now is not against large armies of a single enemy but a plural one, against less visible challenges or faceless enemies that can often adopt a multi-dimensional nature – and even be not overtly aggressive – though in their manifestations these new realities may possess an equally threatening or destabilizing character for these societies.

On the contemporary international stage, there is not a single or predominant challenge to national or regional stability to be considered by the policy-making processes of the enlarged European area or by the Transatlantic Community, but a plurality of new dimensions of instability in the ambit of security. The transformed nature of this notion has meant that talk of "threats" has been replaced by evaluations

of "risks" and "challenges". Direct risks or challenges, since 1989, have less chance to emerge from an intentional foreign aggression than from effects of several non--confrontational developments. Antagonisms and sources of instabilities for long ignored or suppressed and new challenges have rapidly emerged as considerations replacing the anxiety caused by strict military evaluations.

This acknowledgment of a more unpredictable facet in the character of international affairs, has not only had, post-9/11, a fundamental repercussion on US policymaking at domestic and international levels, it has also become the rationale underlying US and NATO's new strategic thinking, translated for Washington into a radical shift from a defensive outlook in security and defence issues to a preventive and offensive posture. The prevailing consensus, today, is that the post-9/11 international environment is based no longer on the management of security but on the management of insecurity, not on specific threats or dangers but on possible risks and challenges; and for the US, more than for any other country – shocked at its loss of invulnerability – this perception has engendered a new and controversial policy of pre-emptive action, whenever possible and before it is too late to act. Not acting is perceived as an even more unacceptable risk.

However, September 11, 2001, has given a rise to a shift in the character of international politics in two fundamental aspects: over US strategic thinking and over the global vision of world affairs from a security perspective. Washington's global war against international terror, starting with the war in Iraq, is only the first manifestation of this policy, based on a premise of international politics that, however, already guided the Allies' conduct of international politics at the end of the Second World War.

New security challenges therefore may stem from the political vacuum within international society or from phenomena with transnational dimensions that are beyond the control of individual states. These concerns have assumed greatest profile in this revised security optics. This context has meant that issues as socio-economic imbalances or deficiencies, industrial failures, humanitarian crises, aggressive or competing nationalisms and ethnic rivalries, civil wars, environmental degradation or accidents, internal social tensions in neighbouring regions, international terrorism, mafia network and drug cartels have all been highlighted as possible new causes of societal instability.

Demographic considerations have especially found a salient profile on the new European and international security agenda, in terms of regional and global stability. In this perspective, while for the industrialised parts of the world, neither

Malthusian prophesies nor equally alarmist post-war studies – that pointed to a looming population explosion and highlighted the imbalance between global rising numbers and limited food supplies – have become true, due to technological advances, migratory pressures have assumed a growing global relevance, including across the European Union as a new variable in the contemporary security equation since the beginning of the 1990s. This concern stems from the continued and exponential growth of world population, in various parts of the world, and often in peripheral areas, where societies endure correspondingly limited economic resources and unfulfilled expectations.

Already, for the European design, the phenomenon of immigration, that for long had been regarded as a secondary dimension, with a low political standing – confined at national levels to law and order imperatives and in international relations to a humanitarian context – has emerged as a noteworthy consideration of instability, initially only in parts of the EU and now across the entire region, and this priority has remained high given the forthcoming membership enlargement process. Equally, environmental considerations have been identified as a new dimension of societal instability. This appraisal of environmental factors not only recognizes for international politics the transnational validity of the "butterfly effect", that underpins Chaos Theory – where the consequences of distant or secondary episodes cannot be neglected for their eventual impact on the interconnected character of the global arena – but moreover it is a recognition that these realities represent a challenge whose nature and importance is hard to refute in the wake of Chernobyl.

The terrorist strikes on September 11, 2001 have added exponential momentum to this perspective of diffuse instability on the international stage and, for Washington, 9/11 has transformed the mathematics of its strategic posture. Equally, the daring and unexpected nature of the terror attacks have finally proved that the potential new threats and challenges of the post-Cold War have now become a reality to be contended with by all states in international politics. Before 9/11, the debacle of Somalia, following the downing of a single US Black Hawk helicopter and the images of its dead soldiers dragged through the city streets, had stood for Washington as a potent determinant in its reluctance to deploy its military hardware and consequently of the existing limitations of US actions and objectives on the world stage (the Kosovo war was an air war). The events of September 2001 have made the United States overcome its self-imposed "Mogadishu syndrome" – whereby the spectre of armed militia with light weapons in any part of the globe was holding the might of the US armed forces retrenched in their

barracks. How many casualties Washington was prepared to take and to inflict in the attainment of its overseas goals was the paramount constraint – post-Vietnam and even more in the aftermath of Somalia – to US defence thinking.

9/11 has laid this outlook to rest. While in its wake the Bush Administration has initially voiced its concern at the new complexity of the international arena, it has unveiled in September 2002 a radical new strategy to deal with the new eventualities on the global stage, starting with international terrorism and the associated risk of unconventional weapons proliferation. US security policy rests on a revised approach of the deployment of US military hardware and consequently Washington has also reappraised any existing reservation over the extent of its objectives and engagements.

The boldness and devastating nature of the East Coast attacks on New York and Washington and the fact that further carnage was only narrowly averted has prompted an overall reappraisal of the US security and defence strategy. The post-9/11 rationale is that a vast, sophisticated and costly military arsenal, that could provide evidence of readiness of action against any aggressive behaviour and that might appear impressive and give a sense of security, was in fact being kept under lock and key. It would provide no deterrence against a determined enemy towards whom the underlying assumptions of rationality and reciprocal damage of this strategy did not apply.

Moreover, the assymetrical nature of the probable new threats – terrorist groups relying on simple conventional weapons or their possible acquisition of crude weapons of mass destruction – and the danger of nuclear proliferation by states espousing radical brands of politics mandated for Washington a new security paradigm. Conventionally, deterrence would only work if the enemy could be targeted, that is if it could feel the heat of vulnerability, but adopting the same posture against a non-conventional enemy would not achieve a similar objective.

Nevertheless, the new US strategic outlook, while radical compared to its former security and defence posture and also highly controversial, does not represent, in essence, an altogether new departure from past approaches to international relations. Its rationale highlights once again the underlying continuity that prevails on the international political stage. A belief in "Never Again" – that had been the guiding principle of Allied post-war behaviour (for never again would Germany be able to threaten its neighbours' territorial integrity and the stability of the Continent; never again would the territorial ambitions of aggrandisement of either Germany or Japan be a cause for worldwide upheavals) – has become not only the implicit assumption of US strategic doctrine five

decades after this uncompromising concept had first been expounded, but also the foundation for policymaking and action at a domestic and international level.

Domestic optimism and unfettered internal freedoms have emerged as the main casualty in this approach. Yet, like for France and the humiliation of the Occupation, Israel and the Holocaust or Germany and Japan and their common disastrous experience in allowing military issues a primary political role, the terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, have impacted in a clear and unequivocal manner on US consciousness, with a belief that Never Again should a similar event be allowed to take place.

At the global level, more than anything, 9/11 represents the political acceptance of a new international environment, with a new security agenda; it was the unequivocal materialisation of one of the often heralded "new threats and challenges" that had gained a growing profile, with a notable literary prominence in the international security discourse, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and yet that had failed to generate real acceptance or credibility. These concerns had remained on the margin of political decision-making, and were either seen as remote possibilities or even had been dismissed as alarmist and dangerous exaggerations, not deserving much political weight, especially after they had failed to materialize in the ensuing years.

This transformation of the strategic environment has also an impact on NATO's vision of collective security, given the new US assertive impetus, as for Washington both the Alliance mission and strategy should evolve to take account of the new realities. While this outlook did not initially meet with the outright approval of all its European partners, NATO has acknowledged the events of September 11, 2001, and their implication for the future security of the region. The fight against global terrorism and nuclear proliferation have assumed a higher profile in the Alliance's brief, given the non--conventional nature of the threat posed by these new developments to their societies (stressed again at the Alliance Summit in Madrid in June 2003) for the new global threats affect all of NATO.

With the demise of the Cold War, the European Union and the Transatlantic Community – including NATO – currently face their most difficult task, and possibly also their greatest challenge, the challenge of Peace and Stability. This is to how to ensure that the acquis of stability and prosperity, secured over forty years of resolute collective policies and actions, is not gradually eroded through a failure in acknowledging any of the new security dimensions.

International terrorism, large-scale peripheral migrations, drug-trafficking and criminal operations that threaten legitimate national activities – notably with large-

-scale counterfeiting of luxury brands or the widespread piracy of goods – regional demographic imbalances, tensions between exogenous religious beliefs and the reductionism of Western secular societies, ethnic tensions or even long-term environmental concerns, have now assumed a dangerous consistency and no longer lie in the realm of speculation. The list of contemporary challenges is quite extensive. The new more peaceful character of international interactions therefore does not warrant a relaxation of security and defence priorities.

Indeed, while the nature of the struggle facing the Alliance may have changed, its character has not, and on one level for liberal democracies, for their value-systems, a striking parallel prevails between the old ideological enemy and some of their contemporary challenging counterparts. In effect, the Marxist ideology that underpinned the former Soviet challenge and that confronted the West has found a new lease of life in some other distinct belief-systems, no less dangerous or threatening and more violent. For these, to paraphrase Marxism, the importance is not to understand the world but to transform it according to new principles or even to replace existing values with nihilistic beliefs.

The increasing linkage of problems has made societies in Europe and the US recognize that although the state-system persists, we are living in a global village – foreign policy in the classic sense has to be replaced by domestic policy for the world as a whole. Lord Robertson, prior to becoming NATO Secretary-General, in his capacity as a Minister in the British Cabinet underscored this reality for the UK and Europe in several distinct areas, declaring that "there is no sovereignty in Westminster over acid rain, or over radioactive fall-out from Chernobyl or the decisions of major companies. When money markets cross national boundaries at will there is precious little sovereignty left over key economic areas". The contemporary character of international politics highlights the fact that security and the search for long-term stability remain for all societies the paramount objective. Yet, until September 11, 2001, many of the security challenges highlighted in the early 1990s had failed to receive an institutional dimension. 9/11 was a wake-up call for international society, if further and more serious consequences are to be averted. The large number of imponderables of international politics dictates that to ensure security and societal stability it is essential to identify problems before they arise, and to address them before they create serious consequences.

Anniversaries are often times to audit the past and reappraise the future. With the second anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the object of

policymaking in international political affairs should be to be progressive and not reactive; to go beyond headlines and accepted beliefs, and to extend analysis to issues that may eventually affect the stability of states or regional areas. The choice for societies and policymakers is to embrace change with all its uncertainties and difficulties, for it is better to transform the future than to be transformed by it. As Primo Levi once said, "we are living in a epoch rife with problems but it is not boring". The challenge lies in ensuring that the epoch does not also become more unstable, owing to outcomes that for long lie neglected and that eventually assume dangerous proportions, but that adequate responses are finally given to the new multi-level security agenda. If 9/11 will achieve this, then a substantive change will effectively have occurred in international politics.