

The Future Challenges Facing Europe as a Global Actor

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TRISTAN THORN, NOV 8 2019

Risk has become the lingua franca of modern life. Since the 16th century governments and companies have increasingly assessed threats in terms of risk (Coker, 2013; Peterson, 2011). During the 20th century, economists like John Maynard Keynes theorised risk as a measurable uncertainty; this approach to risk has been expanded across multiple disciplines and subjects (Peterson, 2011). It has, however, been theorised by Beck (2009; 1992) that modern society is now a 'risk society' constantly engaging with unquantifiable self-generated risks. As risks are socially constructed and the consequences of risks unknowable, Western states have been unsuccessfully trying to prevent future risks from materialising through pre-emptive action; for instance the Iraq War in 2003 (Beck, 2009, p. 53). Since the end of the Cold War the US and Western states have focused on the dangers posed by failing states, and their relation to terrorism (Mazarr, 2014a). This has been at the expense of more strategically important and pressing threats. Whilst terrorism and failed states pose a threat to European security, this threat has been greatly exaggerated by politicians, the media and institutions (Walt, 2015). It is for this reason that this essay will argue that over the next decade the threat from geopolitics and the changing international order will pose a greater challenge to Europe as a global actor than terrorism. This essay will first outline and evaluate different approaches to risk and uncertainty. Secondly, the essay will assess the extent to which risk, particularly terrorism, has been altered and complicated by modernity. Thirdly, the future threats posed by geopolitics and the changing international system will be critically analysed.

For centuries the future was generally left to the realm of the gods; risk and uncertainty were considered to be external and unpredictable (Peterson, 2011, p. 5). During the 17th century, humans began to embrace a less passive role in addressing future uncertainties (Peterson, 2011, p. 5). Risk was assessed using fixed norms of calculation and a means-end rationality which linked causes and effects (Beck, 1999, p. 4; Weber, 1968; Williams, 2008, p. 61). This approach to risk was continued under the bipolar conditions of the Cold War (Williams, 2008). The power, size and capabilities of the Soviet Union were critically analysed by the West to determine future actions and risks (Williams, 2008, p. 65). Through information, communication and interpretation, states were expected to understand the intentions and capabilities of other states; although this may not always be substantive it at least provided a means through which to begin an analysis (Bourne, 2014, p. 102; Buzan, 2008, p. 114). The end of the Cold War was, however, not predicted; the post-Cold War era welcomed a new epoch of unpredictability and complexity (European Strategy and Policy Analysis Systems (ESPAS), 2015, p. 41; Williams, 2008, p. 58).

Globalisation and modernity have created a plethora of multi-directional and unknown risks (Beck, 2009; Williams, 2008, p. 60). Advancements in technology multiplies risk; robotics, genetic engineering and pollution each pose uncertainties which society will seek to avoid, this is especially problematic as all members of society will be affected by the potentially catastrophic consequences (Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 224). This has been labelled by Beck (1992; 2009) as the 'risk society'; a society in contradiction owing to the fact that it is confronted by large-scale threats whose origins lie in the progression and modernity of the society (Beck, 2009, p. 30). Risks cannot be accurately calculated in such an interconnected and globalised world; furthermore blame cannot always be ascribed. (Beck, 2009, p. 50; Williams, 2008, p. 58). Consequently, in the post 9/11 era the threat of terrorism has become a growing concern for the modern interconnected world (ESPAS, 2015; Ministry of Defence, 2014).

Terrorist attacks cannot be correlated with any spatially or temporally localised actor (Beck, 2009, p. 39). The specific actions of a suicide bomber cannot necessarily be determined under the analysis of risk, and therefore they

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cannot be deterred (Beck, 2009, p. 40). This marks a major divergence from the security environment of the Cold War. Terrorists do not follow international norms, they are much harder to monitor and their capabilities cannot be easily ascertained (Williams, 2008, p. 67). State leaders and policy makers must therefore act upon threats with far less information than during the Cold War (Peterson, 2011, p. 703; Williams, 2008, p. 66). Risks are therefore increasingly addressed with pre-emptive or precautionary action (Peterson, 2011, p. 703). Consequently, it is important for states to differentiate between a quantifiable and calculable threat and an unforeseeable risk (Petersen, 2011, p. 703). For instance, the Bush Administration employed the precautionary principle during its War on Terror through the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 388; Williams, 2008, p. 63). The invasion was conducted under the premise that Saddam Hussein held Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) which he could use or share with dangerous terrorist groups and/or 'rogue' states (Beck, 2009, p. 53; Williams, 2008, p. 63). This provides a clear example of some of the perils of attempting to pre-emptively address future risks. The war in Iraq was not a success, the search for WMDs proved fruitless, the country did not stabilise and embrace democracy and the region has been further destabilised (Acharya, 2014, p. 44; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 85; Williams, 2008, p. 62). This is an example of what Beck (1992, p. 23) termed the 'boomerang effect' in trying to control and contain threats, the interconnected society creates even more unknown, and unpredictable, threats.

Since the end of the Cold War, and to a greater extent after 9/11, European, and Western, states have focused on weak states and terrorism as the main security threats (Mazarr, 2014a; Walt, 2015; Williams, 2008, p. 58). Although the link between terrorism and state failure is not necessarily linear, weak states were high on the security agenda because they were considered to proliferate terrorism, regional chaos, crime, disease and environmental collapse (Frith & Glenn, 2015, p. 1792; Mazarr, 2014a, p. 113). As mentioned, this approach to security and risk can lead to a boomerang effect; these failed state policies, based upon elaborate interpretations of risk, have been unsustainable and often counterproductive (Schear and Mazarr, 2014). Despite the cost and difficulties in trying to mould and create states, and the rarity of terrorist attacks, the risk from terrorism and failed states remains high on the national security agenda for many European and Western states (Mazarr, 2014a; Walt, 2015).

The public are routinely warned by politicians and experts of the threat posed by terrorism (Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 225). However, as this risk cannot be measured rationally or quantitatively it is largely subjective; therefore security discourses are socially constructed by the dominant institutions in society (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 8; Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 227; Petersen, 2011, p. 699). Governmentalists argue that this culture of fear is a form of indirect power used to maintain order (Foucault, 2002, p. 219; Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 229). This questions the extent to which terrorism is really the greatest threat to Europe over the next decade. This is not to say that terrorism poses no threat, nor that it is an insignificant threat, but that the threat from terrorism can be constructed and exaggerated for political and societal purposes (Buzan, 2008, p. 115; Mythen & Walklate, 2008, p. 228; Wæver, 2000, p. 251).

This focus upon terrorism and failed states will leave Europe, and the West, poorly prepared for the greater security challenges over the next decade (Jones & Smith, 2015, p. 936; Schear & Mazarr, 2014). These threats include, but are not limited to; climate change, immigration, an ageing population, inequality and energy scarcity (ESPAS, 2015; Grevi, Keohane, Lee, Lewis, 2013; Ministry of Defence, 2014). However, for the purpose of this essay the geopolitical threats facing Europe, and the changing international system, will be focused upon. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was a stark reminder that geopolitics and inter-state conflict is still a threat to mainland Europe (Krastev & Leonard, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014).

Russia feels increasingly threatened by the development and advancements made by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) since the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014; Rasmussen, 2001, p. 304). From Napoleon to the Nazis the flat plains leading to Moscow have been exploited throughout history (Kaplan, 2012, p. 155; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 82). For this reason Russia considers its influence in Ukraine, and its position as a buffer state, to be strategically essential to Russian security (Kaplan, 2012, p. 181; Mearsheimer, 2014). After the Cold War Europe lost interest in Russia; how Russia viewed the world and the humiliation felt after losing its superpower status has been misjudged (Mazarr, 2014b; Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 3; Rasmussen, Struwe, Hoffman, Pradhan-Blach, Kidmose, Breitenbauch, Kristensen, Dahl, 2014, p. 12). Putin is also becoming domestically insecure, his contract with society relies upon the material well-being of the average Russian citizen, the declining oil price and Western sanctions have corroded at this contract (International Institute for Strategic Studies

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(IISS), 2016, p. 169; Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 4).

Russia's decline also resonates with the neo-liberal narrative of the West, that Russia is a power in decline and therefore of little concern (Ikenberry, 2014). Furthermore, Russia, like all autocratic regimes, should eventually transition to a market driven democracy (Ikenberry, 2014; Deudney & Ikenberry, 2009, p. 85). Likewise, it was assumed that the European post-modern order, which was based on mutual interference and the rejection of force, would spread throughout the region (Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 1; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 83). Although it may be true that Russia is facing a decline, and is economically and technologically inferior to Europe, these shortcomings are unlikely to materialise in the short term (Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 3). The risk posed by Russia in the near term, especially the next decade, is still significant perhaps more so because of the decline in Russia (Rothkopf, 2016). Putin will continue to focus upon short term gains, at the detriment of long term issues, to ensure the survival of his regime (Rothkopf, 2016). This neoliberal narrative also ignores the potential power of weak states; between 1950 and 1998 the weaker state has won the majority of battles against stronger states, the weaker side does not need to defeat its enemy, only to endure (Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 4). Russia also holds the world's largest share of natural gas, the second largest share of coal and ninth largest share of oil; Europe continues to rely upon Russia for natural gas, and other resources (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 54; Kaplan, 2012, p. 181). Due to commitments to the post-modern order Europe and the West, is hesitant to use its economic and military superiority in a conventional war with Russia; and the Russian leadership is aware of this (Rasmussen, et al., 2014).

Russia has an influence in many Baltic nations, there are a large number of Russian-speaking minorities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Armenia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and parts of Georgia (Kaplan, 2012, p. 182). Russian minorities in countries like Estonia and Latvia are governed by an often corrupt elite with a different language and history to the Russian minority, it would therefore take little for Russia to foster discord and destabilise these states (Lanoszka, 2016, p. 182). As seen in Ukraine Russia has learnt from its limitations during its incursion in Georgia and developed a hybrid form of warfare (Lanoszka, 2016, p. 188). Covert action, economic aggression, cyber-attacks and the withholding of resources represent a grey area of belligerence which can be utilised by Putin (Mazarr, 2014b). This is especially useful to placate the resentment the people of Russia feel, whilst still not having to commit to a large-scale war (Mazarr, 2014b). It also poses a problem for NATO as it is not clear as to when, or if, a state has been invaded; this is particularly troubling when ascertaining whether Article 5 (an attack on one ally is considered to be an attack on all) would need to be invoked (Lanoszka, 2016, p. 190; NATO, 2015).

Europe, through the EU, has tried to counter this threat by imposing sanctions on Russia (ESPAS, 2015, p. 44). While this approach appears effective, particularly in conjunction with the falling price of oil, it risks weakening the very international system Europe seeks to uphold creating a new sort of 'boomerang' effect (Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 5). The exclusion of Russia could lead to the development of an anti-Western realignment to rival the current international order (ESPAS, 2015, p. 45). This signifies another threat facing Europe over the next decade; the erosion of the US-led international order. Since the end of World War II the US has established a liberal order which is strategically and economically beneficial to the US and Europe (Ikenberry, 1999). Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and United Nations (UN) were presented as neutral stabilising liberal institutions, however the US ensured itself, and the West, would have a lasting dominance in each (Acharya, 2014, p. 35; Bremmer, 2012, p. 44; Ikenberry, 1999, p. 59). The Western institutions and monetary organisations established after World War II however no longer reflect the contribution states make to the global economy or their power in the world (Bremmer, 2012, p. 42).

The rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) is putting increasing pressure on the US-led international order (ESPAS, 2015, p. 68). The globalisation project pursued by the US after World War II now means that there are an array of alternatives to US power and support (Bremmer, 2012, p. 56). The BRICS will have little interest in utilising or engaging with institutions that are not representative of their interests (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 68). It will therefore be in the interest of Europe to redistribute influence and power within the current institutions (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 68). While defence spending in Europe has been declining it has been increasing in Asia, Russia, North Africa, Latin America and the Middle East; and will continue to do so over the next decade (ESPAS, 2015, p. 42; IISS, 2016, p. 5; Ministry of Defence, 2014, p. 122). Although the US will most likely remain the strongest military power in the world this will be of little consolation for European security (Coker, 2009, p. 143; ESPAS, 2015, p. 42;

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Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 20). The US is reducing its global role and retreating from Europe; expecting the European nations to take more responsibility for their regional security (ESPAS, 2015, p. 72; Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 79; Ministry of Defence, 2014, p. 121).

This multi-polar world will present more risks for Europe, and the world more generally (ESPAS, 2015, p. 44; Lehne, 2013, p. 4; Mazarr, 2014a, p. 118). The globalised and interdependent world is reliant upon complex, and efficient, global norms and institutions (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 35). The rise of the BRICS, and withdrawal of the US, does not however mean that a new order will replace that of the US order (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 8; ESPAS, 2015, p. 45). The BRICS have limited convergence on global issues and their considered threats (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 63; Rasmussen, et al., 2014, p. 17). While Russia may be happy to antagonise and reject Western financial institutions, this does not mean that China will share the same attitudes (Mead, 2014, p. 74).

Europe, and especially the EU, has based its power status upon global norms and a post-modern understanding of the world (Krastev & Leonard, 2014, p. 1). Europe, following the lead of the US, has spent decades combating threats posed by weak states and terrorism, whilst assuming the liberal world order will continue to endure and expand (Jones & Smith, 2015, p. 936; Schear & Mazarr, 2014). If this ordered world based upon global norms and trade collapses, the soft power capabilities of Europe will struggle to cope with future threats (ESPAS, 2015, p. 10; Rathbun, 2007, p. 549). While globalisation will see states become increasingly interdependent, this is unlikely to be matched by increasing global governance; a weak multipolar system will struggle to address systemic risks like financial crises, energy crises, conflict, pandemics and a multitude of unknowable threats (ESPAS, 2015). Europe and the EU are particularly vulnerable to these systemic shocks; conversely Russia, through Putin, has proved itself adept at adapting to a disordered world; Russia would, if anything, thrive in such an environment (Grevi, et al., 2013, p. 25; Lanoszka, 2016; Mazarr, 2014).

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