

# **Between Instability and Chaos: The Hybridization of Threats**

**November 30, 2017**

Strategic Research Forum

Jean-Yves Le Drian

*International engagements mean that I cannot be with you today. I send my apologies but seek with these few words of introduction to present my view of the issue that concerns you today. I entrust it to Alain Bauer, who I am confident will be able to convey all aspects of my message. The topic he has chosen is not only crucial, but also suited to the uncertainties and instability that characterize the era of strategic upheaval in which we are living.*

## **1. UPHEAVALS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

### ***- The Proliferation of Security Crises***

This is a period of high tension, the most serious since the end of the Cold War. Never, since that time, have differences in vision and the level of violence and potential for conflict been so great. This can be seen in the number and intensity of security crises, the spread of extreme terrorism, and the significant development of conflict proliferation in a small number of highly susceptible countries. The regional nature of these crises must not fool us into underestimating their global significance, for they directly concern the safety of our citizens, here in France, and in Europe.

### ***- Economic Tensions***

This is compounded by a new economic order. Serious commercial tensions are emerging. The world has never been so interdependent, and some areas are experiencing a spectacular level of growth. Yet, despite globalization, economic cooperation is less apparent than in the early 2000s. The flows of goods, services, and people have never been so high, and yet we are discovering that some actors may still see trade as an unequal relationship, closing their markets while expecting others to open theirs up to them, and stealing technologies and intellectual property.

**- *The Reconfiguration of International Power Relations and Strategies of Power***

These security crises and economic tensions both accompany and explain a redistribution of power at the global level. With them we are seeing a return to the fore of assertive, and sometimes highly aggressive, strategies of power, with an alarming level of risk-taking by some actors. They attest to a significant reconfiguration of international power relations. As in all phases of transition in power relations, we are living in a time where disruption and the risks of surprise have become the standard for strategic reasoning and action.

The leveling of power relations has enabled the development of conflict-creating strategies, which are deployed not only across territories in which a particular country may seek to establish a hegemonic position, but also in newly disputed spaces at the heart of globalization, from the marine and outer space spheres to cyberspace. We are witnessing the return of postures of intimidation, and the obsession of some with constructing spheres of influence with a view to sharing the planet between a few Great Nations, the product of a pure relationship of force. The proliferation of crises at the meeting points of these projected spheres of influence is proof of the instability to which this kind of strategy leads. These new imperial aspirations may also result from regional powers taking advantage of weakening states and bringing over a particular armed or political group onto their side. This international order is highly unstable as it makes competition the norm, based on relationships of force that are constantly in flux and—contrary to all the lessons of the last century—allow little room for the lawful state.

**- *Multilateralism in Crisis***

In parallel, we see the multilateral organizations that regulate the international order weakening. As the rules of the multilateral game are increasingly called into question, there is a growing temptation to withdraw and play the game of solitaire. And yet the promotion of international norms is now more crucial than ever in the face of the global challenges that affect us all. Across all areas, from security, climate, and trade, to energy, health, and education, not to mention cyberspace, the interdependence of our world means that solutions can only arise from coordinated international action. Ongoing global uncertainties and disruption doubtless make this more difficult to achieve than in the past; but it is no less crucial.

**- *The Battleground of Ideology***

The level of international tension has thus reached its highest peak for decades, but I would add that the potential for conflict is not limited to the military or economic sectors. It also affects the sphere of ideology: of representations and values. We are now rediscovering that this area can also be a battleground.

- **The Jihadist Ideology**

Here I am thinking primarily of the jihadist ideology. I have written previously about how this is characterized by a project of a totalitarian nature, inspired by a fantastical view of History in which we, the democracies, are enemy number one due to our values of openness, cultural diversity, and gender and interindividual equality. However backward the terrorist ideology may be, its use of the most modern technologies and propaganda methods has given its deadly narrative an unprecedented virulence that the military defeat of ISIS in the Levant will not extinguish. A militarized terrorist organization can be destroyed by material forces with superior numbers and capabilities, but it is more difficult to overcome an idea that is widely disseminated and entrenched in hearts and minds. The ideological potential for conflict is not, however, limited to the fight against terrorist organizations.

- **The Logic of Power, Interference, and Ideological Struggle**

The rise of authoritarian regimes and the lure of isolationism and nationalism represent a further threat to our democracies. The logic of power I described earlier employs approaches of strategic intimidation that also focus their efforts on the sphere of information and representation. They try to undermine our democracies by turning the very principles that underlie them—openness, freedom of information and expression—into tools of interference and destabilization through the targeted dissemination of fake news and its distribution in the digital space. We are living in a new age of propaganda. Disinformation is not of course a new phenomenon, but the digital revolution and its effects on the formation of public opinion, particularly among young people, has given it an unprecedented impact. This represents a disruptive threat to our very democracy, the scope of which we are only just beginning to grasp.

## **2. HYBRIDIZATION: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON**

For the purposes of analysis, I have thus far distinguished between different types of crisis. However, we know that the most serious crises are always multidimensional, erupting due to a reciprocal aggravation of factors that are isolated in analysis but form an explosive mix in the real world. The fog of war is now hybrid in appearance. In my view, this phenomenon can be described more precisely by considering it from two different angles.

- *The “Hybridization” of Crises*

Firstly, to take up your vocabulary, the hybridization of crises themselves, i.e. several very different destabilizing factors coming together in one theater. I will

provide two examples to illustrate this first level of analysis.

- **The Sahel**

In the Sahel, the terrorist threat does not exist in isolation. It is cultivated by the fertile ground of demographic explosion and migratory pressures, climate change, economic despair, trafficking of all kinds, and institutional fragility. Trafficking, particularly of drugs, is a complex reality. Fed by the absence of economic opportunities, it is cultivated by increasingly sophisticated transnational criminal networks, with sometimes murky links to terrorist organizations.

To find a solution to the crisis in this region, we must therefore take a global, integrated, and multidimensional approach, in which the security response to terrorism and trafficking cannot move forward without action in the area of economic and human development. Hence the launch of the Sahel Alliance by France, Germany, and the European Union in July: this represents a civil and economic complement to the security response led by the G5 Joint Force.

Here I would note that it is in order to promote the security-development continuum as a response to the multidimensional nature of crises that France has decided to increase government spending on development to 0.55% of national wealth by the end of this presidential term.

These security and economic responses must be accompanied by a political response, since there can be no solution to the crisis in the Sahel without restoring confidence in its institutions, and above all in the capacity of the state to protect its citizens. For the void left behind by government institutions is a political void in which criminal and terrorist enterprises and the links they cultivate are able to flourish.

- **Syria and the Levant**

My second example is the Syrian crisis: a distinctive amalgam of combat against terrorist organizations and a civil war aggravated by its internationalization, through the direct or indirect intervention of foreign powers, via foreign militia present on the ground. It has resulted in the exodus of the Syrian population, of which we are well aware. The Syrian crisis further demonstrates a very disturbing aspect of current conflicts: the use of armed violence not only against combatants but also, indiscriminately, against civilians, and humanitarian actors and their infrastructure, in violation of international law.

There is also a risk of conflicts mutating. This is the case in the Levant, due to the internationalization of the war in Syria and in Iraq: Turkey against the PYD, Arabs against Kurds, Kurds against the regime—or Israel against Hezbollah, which is going from strength to strength in the Syrian conflict, where its forces have toughened

up and developed significant capabilities, notably in ballistics. This makes it even more urgent for us to find a political solution in Syria and a national settlement in Iraq. We have been able to win the war, but we must now win the peace, which also requires multidimensional humanitarian, economic, and political action.

### **- *The Hybridization of Actors***

The second level of analysis considers actors and their method of action.

#### **• Mutation of the Terrorist Threat**

Let us think back to the threat represented by ISIS as of summer 2014, when its status moved from that of a clandestine organization to that of a territorial power. Funded by trafficking, equipped with heavy artillery and sophisticated propaganda capabilities, it was able to attract international volunteers, and project its forces abroad by organizing attacks on European soil. With its military defeat in the Levant, ISIS will certainly soon disappear in the territorial form in which we know it. This is the end of the fantasy—and resources—of the pseudo-caliphate. However, it is not the end of the threat of extreme violence against our citizens, interests, and territory. ISIS will seek new ways in which to take action and will take up a more classic mode of terrorism, through clandestine and asymmetric action. This requires us to reconfigure our forces and intelligence services in order to respond to such changes.

#### **• State Threats and Methods of Intimidation**

But hybridization is not limited to terrorist actors. It can also be seen in the behavior of certain states, who are implementing strategies of intimidation in the service of a project of regional hegemony, using hybrid methods and means in order to remain under the threshold of attribution. These actions are taking place across all sectors, from indirect intervention on the ground by militia or “volunteers,” to interference and destabilization operations in cyberspace, and the use of means such as coastguards or fishing boats at sea. Behind this mask lies a resurgent potential for conflict between states, and the threats of escalation and confrontation created by indirect strategies of this kind.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

In response to these mutating threats, we require powerful tools of understanding and analysis. I would like to end on an important point: the need for breaking down barriers, which we must do in order to keep pace with current strategic developments.

We must remove the mental and intellectual barriers that prevent us from understanding the multiple dimensions of these phenomena when they are combined in

one theater of crisis. We must also enable dialogue with government and academic research in order to produce the most in-depth possible understanding of these phenomena. I believe that your work today will make it possible to move forward in such a direction. It is a huge challenge, since you must both think outside the categories established in the past and identify avenues for future action faced with the new configuration of strategic realities. You will benefit from hearing about the latest research and ongoing debates in France in this area. You will also hear international points of view, which are indispensable, as they too force us out of our comfort zone by introducing us to new perspectives. Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you every success in your endeavors.