Michael von der Schulenburg: The Era of Armed Non-State Actors - Risks of Global Chaos

14 February 2020
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The Changing Character of Conflict Platform project explores changes in five dimensions of conflict, namely actors involved in conflict, impact of conflict on civilians, environments in which conflict takes place, methods used in conflict and resources that drive conflict. This blog article focuses on the increased importance of non-state and external actors and its consequences for civilians trapped in armed conflicts.

With the end of the Cold War, the global security environment underwent a silent but radical transformation: dominant threats to the security and integrity of nation-states and state alliances are no longer hostile armed forces from across their borders but armed non-states actors operating within their borders. The world had entered an era of violent conflicts with and among armed non-state actors. The prime risk is no longer a global war fought among states, but a global

chaos resulting from armed conflicts between increasingly failing states and the spread of powerful belligerent non-state actors.

Interstate warfare among hostile armies facing each other had reached its climax in the Cold War, only to fade away ever since. Now, national armed forces around the world battle almost exclusively armed non-state actors. Also, all foreign military interventions, with only two exceptions, have been in armed conflicts among state and non-state actors. Foreign military assistance to rebuild national armies or militias as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, the Sahel, etc. aims exclusively at fighting non-state actors. Today, virtually all battle-related deaths, internal displacements and refugee movements the destruction of livelihoods and physical infrastructure are the result of violent conflicts with and among armed non-state actors. The character of wars and armed conflicts has changed – and it may even change more in the future.

Armed non-state actors are extremely diverse. They include ideologically, religiously and ethnically motivated groups from pro-Communist to Islamist extremists and secessionist movements; rent seeking groups such as warlords, rebel forces, pirates, clans and gangs; and outright criminal organizations such as transnational crime syndicates, drug and arms cartels and human traffickers. Also, governments employ increasingly armed non-state actors such as paramilitary and vigilante groups, militia, security contractors and private armies. In the realities of most armed conflicts, political insurgents, criminal syndicates and state-sponsored paramilitary often become undistinguishable.

The share of world population whose security – or insecurity – now depend on armed non-state actors might be shockingly high. Some studies suggest that soon 3 billion people may live in urban slums and up to one billion in remote rural settlements; areas in which state authority and public services hardly exist. There, the perfect social conditions exist for armed non-state actors to fill the vacuum not occupied by states. Could we be heading towards a situation in which a third of all people live fully or partly under the rule of non-state actors?

Violent conflicts with and among armed non-state actors aren't "new wars" ; they always existed, and actors, goals and means don't substantially differ from similar conflicts throughout history. New is, however, that for the first time since we have nation-states, they have replaced interstate wars as the dominant form of organized violent conflicts. And although mostly local in their origin, it is globalization that allows many such groups to thrive. By focusing on terrorism, we tend to underestimate the complexity of threats that armed non-state actors pose to the global order.

There is not even an accepted term for such armed conflicts. To speak of 'hybrid' (US) or 'non-linear' (Russia) wars is inadequate as they take the view of foreign military interventions. "Proxy wars" is misleading, too. We no longer live in a Cold War of competing world ideologies and the control that foreign powers exercise over state and non-state actors they support is generally weak. Even the most used terms such as "civil war" and "intrastate armed conflicts" (UCDP) seem to fall short as many non-state actors do not recognize the state and its borders and tend to operate transnationally.

Groups of armed non-state actors are generally formed around ideological, religious, ethnic or family identities or social identities formed by disadvantaged groups, in slums or prisons, etc. Whatever the common identities, members will ultimately be motivated by economic injustices, lack of opportunities and social exclusion. For a young unemployed and disillusioned, it may be coincidental if he or she joins a political or criminally group. While declared aims of non-state

actors differ greatly and their methods may be repulsive, they all fight for a share in scares resources. It would be a great mistake to dismiss them only as criminals, ideological lunatics or outlaws and their motive simply as greed. We should rather understand violent conflicts with and among armed non-state actors as forms of "social wars". This would explain why armed non-state actors often enjoy widespread local sympathies, if not outright support.

The shift from wars among states to armed conflicts with and among non-state actors is accompanied by a substantial drop in battle-related deaths. The risk a global level for anyone to be killed in a war or armed conflict has dropped to about 2% today of what it was in the 1950s. However, these figures do not include violent deaths caused by organized crime; those are about four times higher than those caused by "political" armed conflicts.

Rather than on open warfare, armed non-state actors rely on intimidation and terror including on suicide bombings, beheadings, killing of family members, rape and torture. Unfortunately, governments tend to respond with similar intimidation tactics. This causes mass displacements – and in the worst case, ethnic cleansing – but rarely mass killings at a scale known in regular wars. In fact, since 2013, most battle-related deaths are in internationalized armed conflicts.

The far greater risk is that violent conflicts with and among armed non-state actors could make the world ungovernable. Neither embattled states nor the variety of non-state actors could provide security, justice, social services and development we usually associate with state institutions. Most non-state actors may not aim at replacing governments, but they all weaken government authority, particularly its monopoly over the use of force. This results in a vicious cycle in which weak governments "facilitate" the emergence of armed non-state actors who in turn will further undermine weak governments. In a downward spiral all actors – but especially the poor – will end up losing. Much of this development already exists: The 2018 Fragility Index rated about 70% of countries at different degrees fragile, it placed 15% of them under 'alert' or 'high alert'. The Global Peace Index comes to similar conclusions. Interestingly, its criteria for "peacefulness", especially for "positive peace", are factors that are mostly internal and no longer external to nation-states.

Mounting social inequality, the impact of climate change and growing populations will increase pressures under which state authority may further erode and the power of armed non-state actors increase. In a world of soon 11 billion people, the resulting local anarchies could turn into global chaos. The only solution is to rescue functioning nation-states and to redefine their roles in an increasingly globalized world. However, we have not developed an appropriate international legal and normative framework to respond to the challenges to an era dominated by armed non-state actors.

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