

*Analyzing the multiplicity of supposed risks from the world*

# Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security

Last year, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey contended that “we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now.” This year, he was more assertive, stating that the world is “more dangerous than it has ever been.”

Is this accurate? At “Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security,” a Cato Institute Conference held in October, experts on international security assessed the supposed dangers to American security, examining the most frequently referenced threats, including wars between nations and civil wars within nations.

Historically, states have posed the greatest threats to international security. The first two panels discussed whether this is still the case, exploring the dangers not only from traditional nation-states but also from sub-state actors. “The U.S. government has overreacted to terrorism relative to its direct physical costs,” Max Abrahms, assistant professor at Northeastern University, said. But the policy community has also inflated the risk that terrorism would spread throughout the world. “Just as the direct costs of terrorism have been overstated, so too has the political value.”

With a lack of credible state rivals since the end of the Cold War, fears have arisen in response to less traditional dangers, including cyberwar, climate change, and general instability. Mark G. Stewart, director of the Centre for Infrastructure Performance and Reliability



“There’s a disconnect between perception and reality that is mostly in the direction of overstating threats,” PAUL PILLAR (left), a visiting professor at Georgetown University, said at a Cato Institute Conference on the global risks to U.S. national security. JENNIFER KEISTER, a visiting fellow at the Institute, concluded the panel by commenting on the implications of these inflated threats.

at the University of Newcastle, subjected the worst-case scenarios of global warming to cost-benefit analyses. “My answer is that the impact of climate change on national security is manageable,” he concluded. “Change is going to be gradual—not abrupt—and there will be plenty of time to adapt.”

Given that many of these threats have been inflated, the question remains whether the global order depends on a single power enforcing the rules. In the final panel, scholars considered whether the United States must prevent general lawlessness in order to maintain our relative prosperity. Eugene Gholz, associate professor of political science at the University of Texas at Austin, challenged this thesis by focusing on how costly it is to fight wars.

“The claim that the global economy would become unhinged if the United States was not providing primacy and tamping down conflict around the world is just not true,” he concluded.

In the end, many of those scholars that disagreed with the Institute’s positions nevertheless praised its scholarship—even on issues as divisive as foreign policy. “Cato scholars are very strong and clear advocates of the view that the U.S. should retrench,” said Stephen Brooks, associate professor of government at Dartmouth College. “In my view, this comprehensive version of retrenchment . . . is the one which is most interesting and most compelling as an alternative to the current U.S. grand strategy.” ■

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things are going smoothly in the economy, bank examiners might see something that bothers them in a bank. But if they start raising red flags, bankers have plenty of political contacts, and the examiners are going to have a career advancement problem. They can’t prove their point because they are guessing

what’s going to happen in more difficult times. Hence, regulators basically do not regulate from a safety and soundness perspective during good times.

In addition, regulators are politically driven. Those at the top of the regulatory organizations are political appointees. You don’t get to be head of the FDIC without having some

political contacts. You don’t get to be head of the Federal Reserve without having political contacts. Hence, you have people who come from a political perspective, and regulations change a lot depending on who is at the top. Regulators are driven by what’s happening in the current political environment; there is no rule of law. ■