Foreword

In forgotten corners of Museums in the erstwhile European colonies of the Third World, often in uncovered lots, exposed to the elements, neglected, mouldering and overgrown, stand the once-proud icons of the great Empires of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Many of the nations and peoples that spawned the great civilisations of earlier ages are today impotent and culturally pauperized, peddling the remnants of their ancient histories to wealthy tourists from countries that dominate the present age. A power that once boasted that the sun never set on its realm has now shrivelled into its own tiny Island confines, basking in a tainted light derived from its often obsequious association with the world's current and sole 'hyperpower'.

That hyperpower is presently on a global rampage that refuses to recognize its own limitations, the finitude and transience of power, and the ficklenesses of history's "cunning passages and contrived corridors." A young power, it has combined arrogance with uncertainty; great technical proficiency with abysmal ignorance of cultures, psyches and ways of life other than its own; and an overriding and impetuous belligerence with an unwillingness to stay the course or to pay the price of its ambitions, its aspirations and, crucially, its necessary role and responsibility in the contemporary world order.

The unravelling of Empires through the ages is studied closely by historians, but seldom by politicians and administrators. There are powerful lessons to be learned, today, by policy makers, strategists and counter-terrorism warfighters, from the slow erosion of great powers through history, and from

the patterns of relentlessness and ruthlessness that have allowed decidedly smaller forces to prevail over dominant but progressively enervated, sometimes dissolute and self-indulgent, nations and 'great powers'. It is significant, in this context, that some recent critics have noted that "America has become a "feel-good" society unwilling to face unpleasant reality."[1]

The 'barbarians' of our age benefit from another asymmetry. Moral, legal and cultural constraints often bind the more evolved, or at least more settled and stable, civilisations, but impose no limits on their challengers. This is particularly the case with contemporary constitutional democracies – of which the 'sole hyperpower' is one – whose institutional guarantees and mechanisms are assiduously exploited by radical challengers. These challengers simultaneously engage in a war of attrition, using the most extreme force, including unremitting terror, to wear away the margins of their manifestly superior, though evidently neither overwhelming nor invulnerable, targets.

An inability to comprehend and accommodate these processes and realities underlies much of the failure of current counter-terrorism practices, including the diverse campaigns and initiatives under the so-called 'Global War on Terror'. Much of the discourse within democracies remains crippling and largely confined to politically correct dogmas and to a hand-wringing sentimentalism, utterly divorced from the realities of the ground. It is countered by an alternative conformism – a militarist doctrine that seeks quick resolution through the use of overwhelming and focused conventional force – that is equally out of touch with the complex realities of the present and protracted wars of terror.

A rational strategy and response to terrorism is also obstructed by another democratic peculiarity: a timetable that is entirely extraneous to the nature of the protracted war in which the world is currently embroiled, and that is imposed by the electoral cycle. Democracies appear incapable of thinking 'strategically', and of engaging in actions within a long-term context that may have no bearing on, and may, indeed,

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[1] George Soros, *The Age of Fallibility*, New York: Public Affairs, 2006, p. xxiii, http://www.georgesoros.com/index.php?q=free_excerpts_from_the_age_of_fallibility.

undermine, electoral prospects of incumbent parties and leaders in the immediate term. Policies and action are, consequently, framed and followed with an eye to influence popular, often populist, sentiment, not the strategic goals and imperatives of the protracted war in which radical groups and their state backers have plunged the world. Indeed, the only forces who appear, today, to have a strategy, a plan and a worldview (however perverse), seem to be the forces of extremism and terror. The nations and societies targeted by terror remain trapped in cycles of action and reaction, with the initiative lapsing constantly to the side of the radical elements. It is a strategic commonplace to note, in this context, that the party that secures and retains the initiative would incline, eventually, to prevail.

Unless the democratic powers of the world are able to act in concert, with coherence and consistency over extended periods of time, in order to define and create a future consistent with democratic values, they run the risk of succumbing to a future that is even now being imposed upon them.

The enormous and varied history of the experience of counter-terrorism campaigns across the world contains powerful lessons for the future. This experience – both of success and of failure – must constitute the basis of future strategies and tactics, and must quickly supplant the patterns of wishful thinking or the formless gambles that have characterized some of the world's largest recent initiatives in the name of the 'war on terror'.

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