Terrorism: the biggest threat to international relations?

Contemporary international relations refer to the state of affairs during the period that began in the late 1980s with the end of the Cold War. The fall of communism and the assumed ' victory' of liberal democracy had many, such as Francis Fukuyama, hopeful for an ' End of History' and a ' New World Order' of peace and collective security between all states. The truth of the international situation revealed certain issues and threats -new and old – that much of the international community have since had to face. This essay will aim to assess the extent to which terrorism is the most significant threat to contemporary international relations, whilst also suggesting other factors that have created danger; such as climate change , the proliferation of nuclear arms. It will conclude that whilst the prolonged and unknown potential danger that climate change poses to the planet is arguably the most catastrophic, the strain and instability of the acquisition of nuclear arms and the difficulty of controlling who has access to them, causes it to be the biggest threat that the international community has to face.

Terrorism, defined by Douglas Lackey, is, ' the threat of the use of violence against non-combatants for political purposes.'[2]The very characteristics of terrorism makes it a threatening prospect for any state, as any violent act, '[where] the civilian is the direct and intentional target of attack',[3]causes a great deal of difficulty in its prevention. Globalisation, the advancement in technology and the growth of cities – whilst improving living standards for many civilians – has made more locations prime targets for terrorists. Terrorist acts have become more sophisticated and increased the risk of multiple casualties using many forms of attack; arson, suicide bombers and remote detonated bombs, hacking into a state's infrastructure and

intelligence networks. Terrorism itself is not a new or recent phenomenon; the problem that the international community faced, and still faces in the Post Cold War period, is a change in the nature of terrorism.

During and prior to the Cold War, terrorism was often an intra-state occurrence and a symptom of political separatism and instability within a country. Examples of this are the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Tamil Tiger rebels; both of which caused civil wars in Ireland in the 1920s and in 1983 in Sri Lanka. Whilst this is still mainly the case for many African, Middle and Far Eastern countries, the western world has seen an increase in inter-state terrorism. Arguably intra-state terrorism is easier to combat, due to the fact that intra-state terrorists tend to have a clearer and more precise focus; such as the police or members of the entrepreneurial class; which makes it easier for the state authorities to target and track down. On the other hand, terrorist organisations with a religious objective give a broader scope of the enemy. This may lead to a perception in which every member of a different religion or creed becomes a potential enemy or a potential target. It is this religious variant of terrorism that has increased after the Cold War and is at the centre of current international discussions. According to Europol's EU Terrorism Report carried out in 2007[4]and 2008,[5]there were almost 500 acts of terrorism across the European Union in 2006, with a 24% increase in the next year. Whilst most of these attacks were intra-state related an increased amount were by Islamist terror groups from outside the EU. The US and parts of Russia and North Africa have seen similar patterns occurring, showing that this form of terrorism is not a matter for individual states to deal with, but acts that are aimed at the global community . whilst arguably

this can, and has, strengthened the relations between co-operating countries, it has placed strains on relations between other states, and subsequently hinders the progression towards international peace and collective security agreements; which is key in current international relations. This is because for certain states, terrorism and its prevention are not high on their foreign policy agenda. In some severe cases there are instances of the support of global terrorism. The US Department of State recognises four countries to be state-supporters of terrorism;[6]Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria. All are known to have been terrorist safe havens for several terrorist groups, whilst some such as Iran and Syria have politically and financially supported groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. By failing to take action against the threat of terrorism to the international community – and in some cases promoting it – these states become isolated as ' enemies' of the counterterrorism Global Initiative[7]and the United Nations. The effects of this are sanctions, such as restrictions on foreign aid, controls on exports and financial restrictions, placed on these enemy states by the members of the initiative; isolating them further and, , causing a sense for more terrorist action to be taken against the international community. If these state-supported terrorist groups successfully carry out an attack against another state, this action has the potential to become a trigger or catalyst for state military retaliation against the supporter; as seen with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan after the 9/11 bombings in New York. This clearly causes a step backwards for UN peace agreements which clearly states ' the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.'[8]

As well as state support of terrorism hindering international relations, so too does the expansion of the grey-areas of where the roots of terrorism lie. Recruitment and training grounds are now vast, with evidence now suggesting that there is a reason for a, ' fear of the enemy within'[9]. Data from multiple sources has pointed towards an increase in terrorist organisations recruiting from within the states at the heart of the terrorist aggression. The global reach of Al-Qaeda is a source of great concern as more than 3, 000 of its members have been arrested in 98 countries since the 9/11 attack; evidence that this group exists in at least half the world's countries. This factor challenges previously accepted state-intelligence, that inter-state terrorism can be location specific to rogue or failing states outside the targeted state itself. This increases the threat levels, as no clear idea of who the ' enemy' is creates instability and a need for increased defence levels. It is also difficult to establish the source of the terrorist's finance. As previously mentioned this can be acquired from the governments of terrorist-supporting states, but can also be acquired by the groups themselves setting up commercial businesses that provide a flood of sources of finance for its operations. Hence, law enforcement and intelligence agencies must now identify these sources of funding in order to destroy their ability to operate. But with some organisations such as Jemaah Islamiah connected to around 50 commercial businesses, this is a complex and expensive process for states to carry out.[10]

Some cynics such as Daniel Wagner have stated that, ' no matter how good security becomes, it will never be good enough to thwart all of the terrorist threats we face'.[11]To an extent this is true. Even if collectively the

international community does manage to discover the sources of terrorism, it is not likely that they would be able to put a stop to terrorism altogether due to the fact that it has now become something of an ever-changing ideology. Al Qaeda is an example of this. During the Cold War the group aimed at expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan. Once this was achieved, attentions focused on fighting what they thought was the corruptness of the Arab world. Recently, the objective has changed to fighting and targeting those who are considered to be the main outside supporters of these corrupt regimes – a clear reference to the US with its very substantial strategic interest in that part of the world.[12]This aggressive fight for a continually shifting goal suggests that no matter how hard states battle against groups like Al Qaeda, it is unlikely the ' war on terror' will ever end.

However threatening and incessant terrorism is to international affairs, it is arguably within state power and resources, especially in the western world, to singularly or collectively combat it. Governments have the advantage of finance and institutions, such as Counter-Terrorist Units and federal bureaus, with extensive resources especially to deter terrorist acts. Through the use of international relations and international organisations such as the UN and NATO, the amount of resources and expertise can be jointly used in order to overcome the problems faced by terrorism. It could therefore be argued that terrorism in some respects supports the idea of collective security as it forces good international relations and links states with a common goal: to destroy its threat potential, even if it cannot destroy terrorism altogether.

Due to the power that states have in accordance with their state sovereignty, arguably the proliferation of nuclear arms is a threat more

potent than that faced from rebel terrorist forces. The catastrophic capabilities of nuclear weapons of any kind are highly threatening for any state, but in the past this had led to a stalemate that was the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. This has come to be known as the first nuclear age and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent relinquish of nuclear arms by the Ukraine and other former soviet states to the primary control of Russia. Whilst splitting the international stage in two and with the threat of nuclear war hanging over the world, it was, on the whole, a rather stable conflict fought between two superpowers. Many critics are now suggesting that the second nuclear age, which had begun subsequently, will be notoriously unstable and carry with it a greater threat of nuclear war.

This age is far more complex, as countries such as Israel, India, Pakistan, China, Iran and North Korea now all have their own nuclear programs; and with countries such as Iran and North Korea both having deep nationalistic feelings, they are arguably prone to destructive visions of national dominance;[13]having access to nuclear arms places a great strain on relations with these states with others such as the US. The fact that Iran is known for supporting some terrorist groups increases the threat of nuclear terrorism against the west and Israel.

Many other states that wish to obtain nuclear weapons, especially those in Africa, are now choosing to spend state funds on their acquisition rather than their conventional military forces. This can often lead these states to become dependent upon their nuclear weapons; which makes all-out nuclear war all the more likely.

However what creates the most strain on relations arguably is the fact that it would appear that there is the consensus among a few that it is acceptable for certain states to retain their nuclear programs but others cannot even start or continue their own. Whilst arguably in support of the UN's non-proliferation program, today's emerging nuclear states have a great difficulty in getting the international institutions to allow them to have any nuclear capabilities. States are forced to give up their programs under international pressure, but also due to the influence of the US. This often causes animosity between the nuclear-weapon states and those seeking a nuclear program. As seen recently with the case of Iran, the US and European Union has tried to persuade other countries such as Russia and China to start placing sanctions against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for refusing to relinquish its nuclear program. Whilst some would say that this is hypocritical of the nuclear-weapon states, it would appear they are seeking to set an example. On 8th April 2010, the two former Cold War Superpowers, and the current two largest nuclear powers in the world, the US and Russia, signed a new treaty that promised the 30% reduction of their nuclear armoury. President Obama stated himself that, ' By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities'; a clear sign to other states that they do have the right to a moral high-ground – placing pressure on Iran and the like.

The issue of climate change came to the forefront of international politics towards the end of the Cold War with the first UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. Since then the threat that climate

change poses to the modern world has been a top priority for all UN member states. Perhaps what makes this issue so threatening is the lack of control and the influence climate change can have within our societies. Atmospheric pollution can lead to the degradation in biodiversity which in turn threatens our food supplies, fossil fuels are set to deplete severely within the next fifty years; all of which are going to place enormous pressure on international relations. It is likely to affect the poorer countries first – increasing the need for international aid on already stretched resources. This could lead certain states into pull out of the idea of collective security and focus on their own survival, thereby tearing through the international agreements and treaties put in place to prevent the affects of climate change. The community is already witnessing the reluctance of some states such as the US and China to cut down on their carbon emissions, as stated in the Kyoto Agreement, due to the adverse repercussions on their respective economic performance. This sets a precedent that makes collective action by all UN states extremely difficult as a lack of trust in the collective initiative depleats. It would appear therefore that some environmental policies are more popular than others.

Whilst the fact that the world is running out of the natural resources , that we as humans have come to depend on, is a cataclysmic notion, the threat of climate change has arguably brought many parts of the international community together towards a common goal: the protection of the entire planet and therefore the continuation of the human race. Despite the fact that many of the summits held to voice the issues facing the environment has sometimes been ineffective, as seen with the Copenhagen summit in 2009, and caused rifts between states, there have been breakthroughs that

suggest that progression can be made. The fact that climate change can cause so many repercussions into our manmade issues, such as the distribution of resources and the population problem, there is very little that the international community can do to stop it. It can only hope to slow its progression down. The global society faces far bigger threats within human control with the proliferation of nuclear weapons that could lead to the premature destruction of the world if placed in the wrong hands.