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Militarization of Cities: The Urban Dimension of Contemporary Security.

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In addition to new dimensions and new referent objects in the field of international security, it is imperative to reconsider the geographical level of its analysis. The monopoly of nation-states on power is a thing of the past, as is the absolute predominance of national security and conventional warfare as we used to know it.

On the other hand, new actors have emerged to define the “liquid” nature of contemporary security which, in relation to the rapid urbanization on global scale, creates new security concerns and tests our capacity to address them.

Cities are, by their very nature, prone to manifestations of political violence and vulnerable to disasters of various kinds. As nodes of population, infrastructure, investment, centers of political and economic power and hubs of innovation and information networks, urban areas serve as a backbone of today’s global capitalist economy. At the same time, negative effects of contemporary risks and threats tend to multiply in cities; be it terrorism, organized crime and all types of political violence, including armed conflicts; as well as a wide array of natural disasters and man-induced accidents with a potential of affecting up to millions of urban dwellers at once. As both cause and consequence, we have witnessed an unprecedented securitization and militarization of urban spaces, not only in “traditional” armed conflicts but also in case of global events of purely civilian nature. The impacts of this trend have not been researched to a sufficient degree.

Throughout the last decades, non-state actors such as transnational corporations, terrorist networks and movements of various kinds have grown more powerful at the expense of nation-states. While the national governments see their power partly diminished, the existing permeability of national borders leaves them less relevant than ever. What really matters are the increasingly connected, densely inhabited and complex urban areas and the flows of people, investment and information among them. This has direct implications for international relations and security, as the traditional geopolitics on the level of nation-states is partly substituted by urban geopolitics; that is, some key global urban areas compete for power and resources and eventually come to have more economic and cultural (in the optic of soft power) weight than the countries to

which they pertain. In the meantime, the previously mentioned non-state actors organize their activities in, and by means of, contemporary cities. Though the geographical scope of their activity extends to entire national territories, cities serve as their headquarters, support bases or nodes of communication and infrastructure – vital for their existence and continuous evolution.

In addition to the unprecedented emancipation of cities in this respect, there are numerous impacts that the globalization has had on security; such as the internationalization of terrorist networks, proliferation of private security industry, diffusion of military technologies, vulnerability of cyber-space, etc. Moreover, contemporary research in the fields ranging from Urban Geography to Political Science suggests that war is being increasingly urbanized as cities become primary theatres of military operations; be it in the current transnational and interstate conflicts, where guerilla movements tend to lure the occupiers into dense urban areas (in order to compensate for the former's strategic disadvantage); or in cities of Western and developed countries where dissent and sometimes even mere bystanders become subject to militarized surveillance, profiling and, in extreme cases, armed intervention with use of military means.

In order to understand the militarization of contemporary cities, one needs to look at its legal, political, social and material implications. To achieve this end, it is useful to distinguish the two previously mentioned viewpoints of urban warfare; one being fundamentally realist and the other rather critical.

Urban Warfare as a Part of Military Strategy

Omitting the ancient wars and conflicts on the level of city states, the beginning of urban warfare as we know it can be traced back to two important battles from the 20th Century: the Stalingrad disaster of 1942 and the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Tet Offensive of 1968. Although the two differed in terms of historical circumstances and the scope of the objectives they followed, they shared a number of similarities; taking place in densely built-up areas, the battles multiplied the scale and scope of human suffering, property loss, destruction of urban infrastructure and, subsequently, they had strategic consequences for the implicated armies.

Today's military strategies recognize the necessity and unavoidability of combat in urban areas; while the 1990 Gulf War demonstrated the absolute military dominance of the US Armed Forces in open terrain, the *Black Hawk Down* episode of Mogadishu in 1993 proved its vulnerabilities in terms of battle in built-up areas. Given the asymmetrical nature of contemporary conflicts, the enemies prefer to drag the US forces into combat in unpredictable and complex urban areas to reduce the technological superiority that the latter enjoy in open terrain. As a consequence, throughout the last 20 years, the US Governments have funded a robust research aimed at development of military technology apt for use in urban combat. At the same time, they have sponsored and developed numerous security-related documents and strategies which highlight the

importance of urban warfare on all levels of planning, training for and executing urban military operations, as well as post-combat securing of urban areas. One of many examples worth mentioning is the 2006 publication titled “Preparing for the Proven Inevitable: An Urban Operations Training Strategy for America’s Joint Force”, a product of the notorious US-based RAND Corporation think-tank.

Vast urban warfare training complexes have been constructed on the US territory in order to provide training for the US troops subsequently deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the most difficult and deadly military operations take place in urbanized areas. Among the specificities of urban combat are the three dimensional battlefield (streets, buildings and subterranean level), as well as limitations in terms of observation, movement and fire range, particular concerns over concealment, planning, control or supply, as well as presence of natural and man-made obstacles (including a number of non-combatants on the ground). All these characteristics make it more difficult to fulfill the operational tasks as they reduce the military superiority of the world’s most sophisticated armies; the battles in dense urban areas often require low-key methods and familiarity with the environment.

Military Means and Civilian Targets

The largely pragmatic governmental approach to urban warfare has been increasingly criticized, mostly by arguing that the militarization practices are in direct conflict with rights and freedoms of urban populations. Regarding the current conflict zones, it is certain that in many occasions the deployment of military forces and technology in densely populated areas produces a high degree of collateral damage; civilian population and by-standers are often among its victims, and the subsequent destruction of urban (critical) infrastructure leads to supply inefficiencies, lack of basic services and sanitation and exacerbates human suffering. In this respect, the Western militaries’ use of “precision” weapons systems is criticized for not being exactly “precise”.

However, it is not solely the developing world that is experiencing the unprecedented level of urban militarization. High-level meetings and conferences or sporting events (and related public protests) have turned cities into militarized zones in their own right. The Beijing Olympic Games back in 2008 were marked by the Chinese government’s resolute crackdown on any public display of dissent, with such an astronomical security budget that it is improbable to be exceeded in years to come. On the opposite side of the Globe, the city of London experienced the biggest military mobilization since the World War II in relation to the 2012 Olympics; including warships positioned on the Thames River, snipers deployed on the city’s rooftops searching for suspicious individuals among the spectators, and the unmanned drones flying overhead. Had there been any doubt about how the terrorist threat can compel governments to securitize urban public space and its population, the summer of 2012 in London was a spectacular example thereof. The current preparations for

the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro suggest that we are going to see more “paramilitary” Games in years to come.

Indeed, the previously mentioned security measures succeeded in preventing any major disruption or violent attack during the Games; therefore, what is wrong with the militarization of cities?

Regarding the economic perspective, they are the enormous public security expenditures related to such events (an important part of which goes to private security companies, which raises questions about accountability in relation to use of force). Securitization of public space is also criticized by urban geographers (negative consequences on the layout of cities), civil rights activists (concerns about rights to protest, movement, etc.), political scientists (political rationale behind governmental approaches to control of public spaces), sociologists (impacts of public surveillance, profiling and suspicion), etc.

State response to public protests is also an issue of enormous importance; recent years have been marked by anti-government manifestations and violent response by the authorities in numerous cities worldwide. The main motive for preoccupation from the political point of view is the blurring line between the police and the military functions and practices. While in most cases, they are specially trained riot police units that are being deployed to “manage” public demonstrations; military means are increasingly being used against civilian populations in urban areas. Consequently, the entire set of legal and political concerns emerges; does this turn the cities in question into zones of siege and military conflict? What are the consequences for the implicated? And, most importantly, where is the difference between democracies and non-democracies in this respect, if we compare the states’ responses to public demonstrations; the empirical evidence suggesting that both tend to adopt very similar and often military measures to curb the public displays of discontent?

Conclusion

It is obvious that the urban militarization has been growing in terms of scope and depth, fomented by the processes of globalization and urbanization in recent decades. On one hand, it is a rational choice made by governments to adapt the military strategy and tactics to the reality of contemporary conflicts (i.e., asymmetrical warfare). On the other hand, in both developed and developing countries, the urban militarization is criticized for being indiscriminate and abusive. The considerable public security expenditures, as well as social, political and material implications on cities and their populations are indisputable. At the same time, violent reactions to public demonstrations by government authorities have raised concerns; while the line between police and military functions has been further blurred by those of private security companies. In a nutshell, an unprecedented mixture of actors now affects security of citizens on multiple geographical levels. The urban nature of current political violence turns cities into theatres of civilian and military conflicts and challenges the traditional paradigm of national security.

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