Globalization and Terrorism

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Global history is often marked by periods when a singular process is dominant and this process often becomes not only the constitutive but also the definitive characteristic of that period. Consider for example the era of colonialisms and global empires (1500-1900), the era of decolonization (1900-1970), the era of industrialization (1600s- late 1900s), the information age (1990s), the era of globalization that also coincides with the information age (1990s onwards).

Finding a dominant global theme helps in getting a structural understanding of history. Themes are very useful in teaching history as well as politics. But the present period is a conundrum for someone like me who teaches both globalization and foreign policy and national security. Are we still living in the era of globalization or are we witnessing the emergence of an era of terrorism?

So far I have been fudging the issue by labeling terrorism as the dominant global issue of our times and globalization as the dominant global process. Perhaps I must develop a course on globalization of terrorism that explores not only how terrorists act across borders but also how terrorism itself is facilitated by the processes of globalization. We can perhaps then get a handle on our time by understanding how terrorism and globalization affect each other. My early intuition is that while globalization facilitates global terrorism; terrorism itself will put the brakes on globalization.

After the Sept. 11th terrorist attacks against the US, the very discourse of international relations and global politics has been transformed. Prior to Sept. 11th, the dominant issues were geoeconomic in nature. Globalization and humanitarian issues occupied the agendas of international summits and international organizations. But now geopolitics and security concerns have once again become the central issue and the “old language and institutions” of
the cold war are shaping our thinking about global politics.

A simple survey of the use of acronyms by media illustrates this change. Terms such as WMD and CIA now occur more frequently than WTO and IMF. When was the last time that protests against WTO and IMF, or anything about these institutions made the headlines? As I write this piece I cannot even recall the names of the Presidents of the World Bank or the IMF (even though I debated the former through a video link from Philippines just over 18 months ago), but I can now name neighborhoods in Tikrit (Iraq) and Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) where bombs explode at regular frequency.

I remember the days, just three semesters ago, when I had my students doing assignments on topics such as “the culture of globalization”, and on “globalization of cultures,” but now they prefer topics such as “clash of cultures,” or “clash of civilizations”.

But has the world really changed all that? Globalization as a process was facilitated by the liberalization of transborder transactions by the devolution of state sovereignty. Globalization was mobility. Mobility of labor, ideas, capital, technology and profits can move across borders with minimal governmental interference. Above all, globalization was a sense of profound optimism that the world was inevitable heading towards greater and greater prosperity for greater and greater numbers.

The great sense of insecurity that terrorism now inspires in the US economy and the government, the two most important forces behind globalization, has resulted in a reassertion of sovereignty by the US and other nations. The fear that soft borders created by globalization facilitate the mobility of terrorists, their finances and their ideas, is pummeling states towards reconstructing the boundaries and the borders that globalization was subverting. Ariel Sharon’s “security fence”, under construction to keep security inside and terrorists outside, symbolizes this anti-globalist trend more than anything else.

The efforts to prevent terrorists from moving their resources is leading to greater scrutiny of banks and setting up of new measures that will slow down the flow of capital. The fear that porous borders allow terrorists to enter target countries is leading to new rules about border patrol, visa regulations, and monitoring of foreign
travelers. New security measures at airports have already raised the costs of travel and are affecting the profitability of the airline industry. Extensive customs and increased regulations on imports are slowing international trade. Higher cost, as a result of all the above is reducing profits and may dampen the incentive to seek foreign markets.

It is ironic that global terrorism, the phenomenon of terrorists operating in and against several nations simultaneously, was facilitated by globalization and now it has become the biggest challenge to globalization. Global terrorism depends on the success of globalization. In fact one may very well conceive of global terrorism as a facet of the global culture resulting from globalization.

Will the rise of terrorism arrest or even reverse globalization? One of the dictums of Globalism is the globalization is not only inevitable but also irreversible. If this is true, and if it is also true that globalization facilitates global terrorism, then will global terrorism become an integral part of our times?

Should I stop teaching globalization as part of International Political Economy, and terrorism as part of national security and foreign policy and integrate the two into a new discipline? What shall we call it – globalization of terrorism, or the terrorism of Globalization? Aah! and I thought teaching in a small liberal arts college in the deep Midwest of America, where the hunter-gatherers are still hunters, would have kept me safe from the agonies of globalization and the insecurities of terrorism.