

Threats are the traditional stock-in-trade of foreign and security policy, particularly in the form of external military force. The meaning of the term »threat« has widened enormously in recent decades: It now encompasses all actions and outcomes that give rise internationally to »undesired consequences« in the sense of disruption, harm, or damage. Outside the security policy community such interdependencies are usually known as »systemic risks.«

Since the end of the bipolar order of the Cold War – which rested on a supposedly predictable conventional and nuclear balance of powers – threat models and risk profiles have become ever more confused: They now have to contend with the outbreak of ethnic, cultural, and religious conflicts, state failure, regional confrontations, fundamentalism, environmental threats, and quarrels over resource access. Hand in hand with the increasing contradictoriness and complexity of current threats the susceptibility to simple explanations and solutions is also growing. Particularly since 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London the following year fundamentalist terrorism has come to the fore as the principal danger, and politicians not only can no longer ignore the fear of terrorist attacks but have seized upon them. Fundamentalist terror has mutated into a political tool of universal application, similar to the simplistic generalizations and ludicrous exaggerations of the Cold War's »friend-or-foe?«. Indeed, the USA justified its invasion of Afghanistan and pre-emptive war in Iraq in terms of the greatest »existential threat ... since the Civil War« (Condoleezza Rice), by terrorism, and the rogue states that support it.

Threat models are indeed models, social constructs that conceal political purposes and whose validity must be subjected to the same critical instruments as all other political or scientific assertions about reality. For example, threats must be evaluated on the basis of an adequate body of evidence and appropriate concepts. The more accurately risk dimensions are distinguished – for example, drawing a distinction between »normal« and »problematic« risks likely to give rise to disruption on a large scale, as well as risks likely to cause *extreme* disruption – and the more precisely the undesired consequences of complex international processes can be modeled, the easier it will be to act politically in a manner appropriate to the problem and proportionate to the risk.

In this issue of INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND SOCIETY two key areas of US foreign policy are revealed to be largely determined by ideological templates, potentially giving rise to false or even fatal choices. Martin

Senn examines the model of Iran prevalent among US decision-makers. In Washington the Middle Eastern state is regarded as undemocratic, aggressive, and irrational, in possession of weapons of mass destruction and intent upon destroying the regional and, if possible, the international order. This bogeyman, perpetuated since the early stages of the Iranian revolution, is based upon astoundingly superficial and deficient knowledge. Until recently the US State Department had no more than two Iran specialists reliant, in the absence of a US embassy in Iran, upon patchy secret service information and secondary sources.

Iran's role in the Middle East is the focus of Michael Bröning's contribution. He examines the widespread view that there is an Iran-directed Shiite alliance, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Shiite dominated government in Iraq, and extending as far as Saudi Arabia. In fact, the confessional dimension plays a much more minor role, and moreover there are significant political tensions and conflicts within the Shia itself. All these warnings of a »Shiite crescent« bear the unmistakable imprint of political calculation.

Marc Saxer deals with a very different form of threat, namely the risks posed to the international order by »failing« and »failed« states. The efforts of the international community to bring an end to atrocities, establish human rights, and restore order in disintegrating states have led to the development of new concepts and instruments, such as the »responsibility to protect« and the dispatch of military missions. Application of such instruments is impossible without considerable restrictions on the target country's national sovereignty, however, and as a rule implies the at least partial administration of sovereign rights in the name of the international community by another state or group of states. There is as yet no broad international consensus on how to deal with state failure and internal conflict in third countries. Particularly urgent is the need to involve emerging states such as China in both the discussion and the implementation of appropriate measures.

Alongside the central topics Rainer Stachuletz and Hansjörg Herr examine the causes of the financial market crisis and outline a reform concept; the two specialists emphasize that deregulated financial markets contribute nothing to societal well-being since they harbor considerable potential for instability and have negative consequences for growth, employment, and asset and income distribution in deflationary periods. Bernhard Stahl comments on the reasons for misunderstanding between Serbia and the EU; Heribert Kohl assesses trade union development in

Eastern Europe; and, finally, Robert Chr. van Ooyen criticizes the fact that the German Constitutional Court is increasingly shielding foreign policy from parliamentary control.