

A GRAND STRATEGY ESSAY

# Domestic Security and Foreign Policy

by Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar<sup>1</sup>

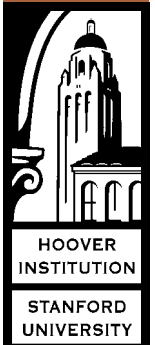
Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

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Americans are currently enjoying some of the lowest violent crime rates in a half-century.<sup>2</sup> In addition, no terrorist attack even remotely on the scale of what occurred in 2001 has taken place in the United States since then. Given these circumstances, it should be no surprise that domestic physical security has become a less salient concern for millions of Americans.<sup>3</sup> Exceptions exist, of course. After the Boston Marathon terrorist attacks in April 2013 that killed three and injured 264,<sup>4</sup> public concern about terrorism crept upward in some quarters. Certain organizations, such as the counterterrorism division of the New York City Police Department, remain profoundly concerned about preventing terrorist attacks. The Chicago mayor's office knows all too well that the persistent declines in violence achieved in most of the country have been far more attenuated in the windy city, and that the ongoing violence has the potential to threaten political fortunes as well as, in some neighborhoods, personal safety. But for the most part, the relative success of federal officials and police in foiling terrorist attacks, combined with the long-term declines in violent crime, has made it easier for many Americans to turn their attention elsewhere. And with the notable exception of Hurricane Katrina, even responses to natural disasters in recent years have avoided the type of striking failure that would spark grave concern among the general public.

The American public should not take the current situation for granted. Differences in the extent of recurring violence are a major factor explaining the differences in countries' economic and political outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Even in societies that do not face threats of pervasive violent conflict, increasing physical insecurity can upend social and political conditions. In the United States, institutions and longstanding social conditions have almost certainly played a consequential role in protecting the public from insecurity and violence, and there is every reason to think they will continue to do so. Still, seldom if ever in history have large countries governing hundreds of millions of people been able to hold at bay for long the risks from internal violence

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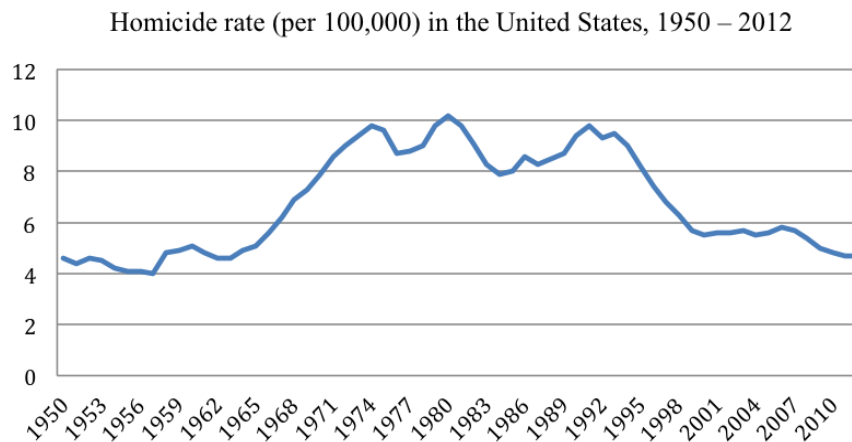


or major natural disasters. The prospects for success of major terrorist attacks can vary considerably depending on changes in technology, the organization and characteristics of any groups involved, and geopolitical circumstances. Together these factors can affect the elasticity of the response of adversaries to the policy tools available to government, such as economic statecraft or changes in border security policy.

Violent crime, meanwhile, has undergone an extraordinary secular decline in the United States over the last few decades. As Figure 1 shows, the homicide rate in 2012 is comparable to that of 1963. Similar trends are present in other categories of violent crime. Although scholars have made some progress in understanding violent crime in recent years, they have yet to explain the full extent of the decline in violence in the United States. Even if it is true (as some scholars assert) that human societies are becoming less violent in the aggregate over time,<sup>6</sup> the amount of violence occurring in a specific country in any given decade can rise or fall over the course of years or even months — a time scale that matters profoundly for human endeavors. Figure 2 shows the staggering changes in physical security that occurred during a matter of months in one Mexican metropolitan area — Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León — for instance. The United States is admittedly in a different position given its more reliable, higher-capacity institutions capable of deploying the authority of the state. While the United States has experienced little direct spillover violence from Mexico, the erosion of physical security in some previously safe areas serves to reinforce how fragile peace can be — or, to use the parlance of the social sciences, how equilibria associated with physical safety can so readily break down — just 87 miles away from the American border.

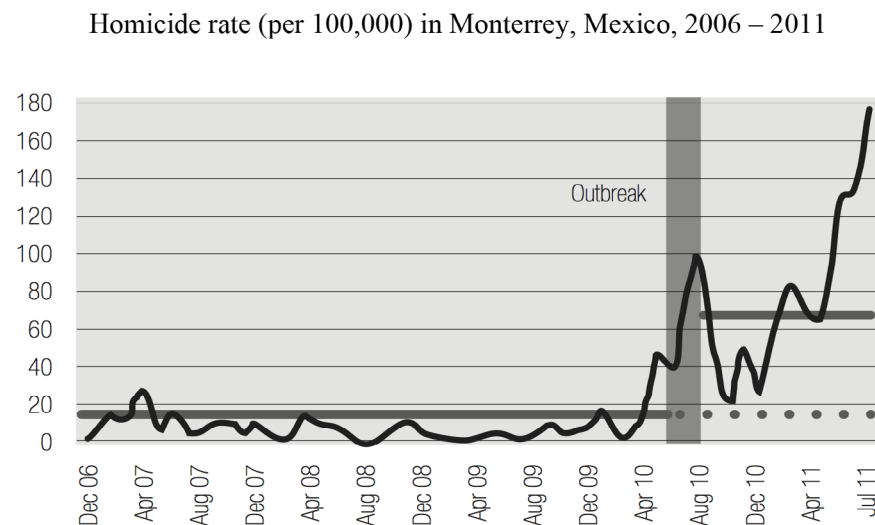
Terrorism and violent crime obviously differ in important ways. They evoke different responses from the public and receive distinct treatment in statutes.<sup>7</sup> And natural disasters may seem to belong in a completely different discussion. Without entirely dismissing the obvious distinctions, it is worth recognizing that terrorist attacks, serious violent crimes, and major disasters can all take a toll on the physical safety of a national population, and (almost as important) on citizens' subjective sense of security. In some countries, for example, inadequate governmental responses to natural disasters can exacerbate criminal or insurgent activity. In the United States, the economic consequences of major natural disasters can be enormous — by one estimate, between 1980 and 2013 the United States experienced 151 natural disasters that each caused damages exceeding \$1 billion, and the total inflation-adjusted cost of these events was over \$1 trillion.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the response to major terrorist attacks or organized violence often relies at least partially on the same organizational and technical infrastructure involved in responding to natural disasters. An interoperable emergency communications infrastructure, for example, connects local, state, and federal officials responding to natural disasters as well as to terrorist incidents.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 1**



**Source:** Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Homicide Trends in the United States*, 2012.

**FIGURE 2**



**Source:** Eduardo Guerrero-Gutierrez, *Security, Drugs, and Violence in Mexico: A Survey*, 2011.

As with the responses to terrorism and violent crime, a country’s capacity to respond effectively to natural disasters depends heavily on the competence, resources, and capacity for innovation of government agencies entrusted to protect the public. For present purposes, I use the term “domestic security” to describe those issues related to the capacity of the state and society to control or respond to terrorism, reduce criminal violence, and mitigate natural disasters. While the term “homeland security” has often been used since 9/11 to encompass some of this

domain, I avoid the term here because the United States government has been remarkably inconsistent in defining the concept.<sup>10</sup>

It should come as no surprise that domestic security, as I have defined it, is affected by what happens abroad. Though some terrorism arises entirely from domestic sources, the planning and financing of terrorist attacks affecting American interests often originates outside our borders. Scholars and policymakers are increasingly learning about cross-border networks, such as the transnational gangs that have grown as foreign inmates in American prisons are deported to Latin America. Pandemics are just one salient example of how risks associated with natural disasters depend to some extent on foreign policy choices involving international cooperation, trade, and migration policy.

The relationship between foreign policy and domestic security also runs in the other direction. Terrorism, violence, and disasters can prove enormously consequential for a country's foreign policy. The economic consequences of domestic security are perhaps easiest to appreciate. Terrorist attacks and natural disasters can cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Domestic security problems can mean lower consumer demand in some sectors, fewer international visitors, and international private-sector backlash against new security policies such as NSA surveillance.<sup>11</sup>

Social cohesion is also a route through which domestic security can have consequences for foreign policy. Greater agency capacity can increase officials' ability to target individuals posing genuine threats and reduce the need for crude profiling strategies like the now-defunct National Security Entry-Exit Registration System.<sup>12</sup> When local police, federal agents, and counterterrorism officials fail to prevent attacks, the resulting fear and anger among the public can exacerbate animosity toward groups perceived as responsible. Such animosity can cast a long shadow as policymakers work to forge coalitions in a diverse country that depends on immigration and social cohesion across distinct ethnic and national-origin groups. Social cohesion does not guarantee strategic power. Contingencies include the nature of a country's institutions, its geopolitical context, its economic conditions, and its geography. Yet as a general matter, it is harder to administer armies, police forces, and even tax systems where stark social divisions and inter-group distrust exist.

Foreign policy may also depend on domestic security because of the inferences other countries or non-state actors might draw from the presence of physical security problems, and the chilling effect of insecurity on the actions of American policymakers. A country's inability to reduce violent crime, respond effectively to disasters, or mitigate the risk of terrorist attacks can weaken its international reputation, signaling internal divisions or an otherwise difficult-to-observe lack of organizational capacity. Concerns about the efficacy of a country's domestic security capacity can deter policymakers from resettling refugees that might pose a domestic

security problem,<sup>13</sup> or from launching a diplomatic offensive that may result in increased threat of attacks. To the extent one believes in the value of a grand strategy, successful terrorist attacks or spikes in violent criminal activity can distract a country from its longer-term strategy. Increases in homicides and other violent crime in the decade between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, for example, fueled domestic concern about drugs. Concern about the consequences of the drug trade and its associated criminal activities, in turn, had major effects on the United States' relationship with Latin America for decades.

In short, domestic security considerations can constrain and shape foreign policy decisions in important and underappreciated ways. There is no simple trade-off between expending resources or political capital on domestic security and advancing more conventional foreign policy goals. Overseas aid and political engagement abroad can, at least in principle, help a country mitigate the risks of terrorism within its borders. But the converse is also true: investments in domestic law enforcement, counterterrorism, and disaster preparedness and response can affect the country's ability to advance national interests through its foreign policy.

## Notes

1 Note to readers: I started answering the current question in the last paper. That was deliberate, as I found it difficult to separate the concept of grand strategy from its domestic foundations. My paper today addresses an additional cluster of issues that also affect foreign policy and are often grouped under the rubric of "homeland security." As I note elsewhere, I am a bit skeptical about the utility of the term "homeland security." I am also agnostic about whether these topics bear the same relationship to grand strategy as the four issues I discussed in the last paper (education, immigration, economic policy, and the capacity of public organizations). But leaving aside the question of how what I have called "domestic security" relates to grand strategy, there is no doubt in my mind that domestic security affects a president's (and, for that matter, the nation's) capacity to pursue its foreign policy goals.

2 The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports track violent crime rates on the basis of reports from local law enforcement. The estimated number of offenses per 100,000 people was 386.9 in 2012, the lowest rate since 1970. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics (2012), <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/Search/Crime/State/StatebyState.cfm>. See also "Line-of-Duty Police Deaths Reach 50-Year Low," *Boston Globe*, December 29, 2009.

3 See, e.g., "Few See Adequate Limits on NSA Surveillance Program," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, July 26, 2013, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/26/few-see-adequate-limits-on-nsa-surveillance-program/>.

4 See Deborah Kotz, "Injury Toll from Marathon Bombs Reduced to 264," *Boston Globe*, April 24, 2013.

5 See Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6 See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

7 See, e.g., 18 USC § 2331 (defining "international terrorism" and "domestic terrorism").

8 See Adam B. Smith and Richard W. Katz, "US Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters: Data Sources, Trends, Accuracy and Biases," 67 Nat. Hazards 387 (2013).

9 See US Department of Homeland Security, National Emergency Communications Plan ES-1 (2008).

10 Compare US Department of Homeland Security, Quadrennial Homeland Security Review II (2010) ("Homeland security describes the intersection of evolving threats and hazards with traditional governmental and civic responsibilities for civil defense, emergency response, law enforcement, customs, border control, and immigration.") with US Office of Management and Budget, Budget of the United States: Analytical Perspectives 415 (2014) (which excludes response to natural disasters and many Coast Guard functions from coverage under the "homeland security" umbrella). The extent of residual ambiguity in the concept of homeland security even spurred the Congressional Research Service to devote an entire report to the topic. See Shawn Reese, *Defining Homeland Security: Analysis and Congressional Considerations*, CRS Report to Congress: R42462 (January 8, 2013).

11 See, e.g., Shan Carter and Amanda Cox, "The Reckoning: One 9/11 Tally: \$3.3 Trillion," *New York Times*, September 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/cost-graphic.html>.

12 Cf. Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, "The Mismatch Between State Power and State Capacity in Transnational Law Enforcement," 22 *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 15 (2004).

13 See, e.g., "Durbin Holds Hearing on Syrian Refugee Crisis," Office of Sen. Richard Durbin, US Senate, January 7, 2014, <http://www.durbin.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=1d5d625e-2b75-4c85-8686-304934686047>.

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First printing 2014

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## Working Group on Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy

The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

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