COMMON SECURITY – A SOUTHERN VIEW

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Barry Gilder
Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection

'Common Security' – the words stare up from the invitation letter as I struggle to prepare myself for the brief migration from a sweltering Pretoria spring to an icy Stockholm autumn. In the desperate attempt to process these two seemingly innocuous words, two questions mischievously scroll across the mind – 'common to whom?' and the 'security of what?'

The concept of common security grew out of the work of the Palme Commission in the early 80s of the closing century of the last millennium. That seems like a long time ago. Indeed, it was a time very different in many important ways from our own time. It was a time when two gigantic and equally ardent adversaries faced each other across a localised and a global frontier, each with the power to obliterate the other, and each competing desperately with the other to become a better obliterator.

In that milieu, what was common about common security was, in its simplest terms, the mutual desire of these adversaries and their respective ideologies to survive and, of course, to prosper and dominate the international system. What had to be secured was their ways of life, their ideologies, their national power and their national interests. As for the rest of the world – the nations that lived on the fringes of the Cold War, on the outskirts of the world economy, in the townships and rural villages of the global nation – what was common about their security was that it aligned with the interests of the big players. Those of us who spent the 1970s and 80s in apartheid prisons or the ANC's military camps in Angola or dodging assassination attempts in the front-line states of southern Africa often ask ourselves – somewhat wryly and suspiciously – why was it that the big Western powers at the time could only contemplate the possibility of the end of apartheid and an ANC government in South Africa when the Soviet Union was collapsing? Was apartheid South Africa's security common to them too?

Still, the ideas generated by the Palme Commission in the 1980s took a long time to mature and bear fruit. Some post facto intellectuals would even claim that the notion of common security born at that time played a key part in the ending of the Cold War and perhaps even the birth of democracy in South Africa.

But what, in fact, did the end of the Cold War bring to the notion of common security? Did the receding of the threat of mutual annihilation suddenly bring about a global common understanding of what constituted threats against the nations of the world and the world as a whole?

I would like to try to answer these questions, not academically, but through my own experiences. I spent much of my 13 or so years as an official of the democratic South African government working in the security sector. In this capacity I had many opportunities to interact with the security and intelligence services and other government departments of many of the countries of Europe and North America. I watched with interest as the security concerns of these countries evolved over time.

From the dizzy years that immediately followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of democracy in South Africa until the fractious years that followed 9/11, I watched as western security services desperately sought new enemies to replace their Cold War adversaries. In the early days it was the 'Russian mafia' – after all they had all the counter-Russian expertise and experience.

Then – as the ideological poles of the Cold War melted away, and Russians became more Russian and Georgians became more Georgian and Muslims became more Islamic and Jews became more Jewish and Zulus became more Zulu – the overarching security concern of the countries of Europe and North America evolved from 'Islamic fundamentalism' to 'Islamic extremism' to 'Islamic terrorism' to 'international terrorism'.

Here is a little story. At the turn of this century we experienced a wave of urban bombings in and around the exquisite city of Cape Town. Our information was that these were carried out by clandestine cells attached to an organisation called People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD). Many of the members and leaders of this organisation were drawn from the relatively small Muslim population of Cape Town.

The Western intelligence services fell over each other's feet to give us assistance – equipment, money, expertise, the uncovering of the international links of these 'terrorists', the establishment of a regional counter-terrorism centre in our country. We politely kept them briefed as we conducted our own investigations. After pursuing traditional intelligence investigations for some time, with some success, we decided to change tack. We engaged with community leaders, with religious leaders, with academics and eventually with the leadership of PAGAD itself. In the process we found that the phenomenon we were studying evolved out of a very real community frustration with the scourge of gang violence and drugs in the Western Cape province and a deep anger with the seeming inability (or unwillingness) of the democratic government to deal with it.

While the use of urban terror tactics may well have been inspired by the use of terror tactics elsewhere in the world (if not also by the long-standing terror tactics of the gangs themselves) there was no real link to 'international terrorism' (as it was now being called). Soon after our engagement with the leadership of PAGAD and the communities, the terror attacks stopped.

The question must be asked of this experience – if we had accepted that the urban terror attacks in Cape Town at this time were part of our 'common security' with the western countries, would we perhaps have started a little 'war on terror' of our own, perhaps with similar consequences of further radicalisation and escalating violence that the larger 'war on terror' has had globally?

There is another little story – less dramatic than the first. For some years I headed South Africa's department of home affairs, responsible – among other things – for immigration management. In that capacity, in 2004, I was invited to attend an international conference on migration in Barcelona.

I thought I was coming to share with my equals South Africa's experiences in migration management. But nobody seemed much interested in my paper on the challenges and strategies of immigration management in South Africa. What they were interested in was what we could do to stop the people of our continent jumping into boats and paddling across the Mediterranean to share the 'common security' from war and deprivation with their European brothers and sisters.

The point of these two little stories is, I hope, obvious: Common security is not and cannot be the imposition of the security concerns and strategies of the powerful on the less powerful.

If the notion of common security is to be of any use, perhaps it is best to juxtapose it to national security. For all nations, by their very nature, notions of security are tied to notions of national interest. If they are to take on board the concept of common security they would naturally do so by passing it through the question: 'What's in it for us?' The answers to this natural question must find a way of transcending national boundaries while accepting them as a reality.

South Africa is perhaps an interesting case study. Since the birth of our democracy we have struggled to find common ground on what are our national interests and what therefore constitutes national security for us. In stumbling through this intellectual and practical maze we have perhaps relied for most of the first years of our democracy on instinct – an instinct born out of our own experience that our victory against apartheid was very much presaged on the movement of global solidarity with our struggle.

A key pillar of our foreign policy since our birth has been active engagement in conflict resolution and peace-making in our region and on our continent. Some may argue that this has merely been an assertion of our national power and economic hegemony in our neighbourhood. But we have always understood that, if we are to effectively address the inequities and injustices of our past and grow and develop our economy to satisfy the needs of all our people, then we would have to do so in a neighbourhood that is also developing and growing and having to address the needs of its people. Our neighbours cannot do this if they are at war.

So the view from the South on common security is indeed that it is 'a question of global solidarity'. In simple terms this means understanding (and accepting) each other's national interests. It means being able to jointly and equally define and understand our common interests. Above all, it means developing the ability to rise above the habits, instincts and tendencies and the narrow boundaries of national interest with which the world has been governed until now.

Perhaps it means, in the words of a slogan of South Africa's progressive trade union movement: 'An injury to one is an injury to all'