Cities and new wars: after Mumbai

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The Mumbai attacks of 26-27 November 2008 are part of an emerging type of urban violence. These were organised, simultaneous frontal assaults with grenades and machine-guns on ten high-profile sites in or near the central business and tourism district.

This has affinities with the asymmetric street warfare waged by the gangs in Rio de Janeiro that every now and then announce they will take over a major central area of the city from (say) 9am to 5pm: the result is shuttered shops and empty streets. If the police try to respond, it is open warfare, and the police rarely win - this is a challenge [1] for which the police are not trained. After 5pm the gangs withdraw. It is often said that all of this results from inadequate policing or crime waves.

But that is too simple. There is a deeper transformation afoot. It is still rare but it is more frequently becoming visible [2]. It is as if the centre no longer holds. Cities seem to be losing the capacity they have long had to triage conflict - through commerce, through civic activity. The national state, confronted with a similar conflict, has historically chosen to go to war. In my new research project - on cities and war - I am studying [3] whether cities are losing this capacity and are becoming sites for a range of new types of violence.

Further, the new asymmetric wars have the effect of urbanising [4] war. This brings with it a nasty twist: when national states go to war in the name of national security, nowadays major cities are likely to become a key frontline space. In older conventional wars, large armies needed large open fields or oceans to meet and fight, and these were the frontline spaces.

Today the search for national security may well become a source for urban insecurity. The "war on terror" reveals that cities become the theatres for asymmetric war, regardless of what side of the divide they are - allies or enemies. The attacks in Madrid, London, Casablanca, Bali, are symptomatic. So too is the United States's conventional military aerial bombing. It took under three weeks to destroy the Iraqi army's resistance and take over power in 2003. But then the asymmetric wars set in, with Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and other Iraqi cities the sites of conflict - for years. Indeed, the fact that the Mumbai attackers [14] evidently sought and prized Americans and British among the hostages they took, is clearly related to George W Bush's declaration of war on Iraq and Britain's supportive role.

The traditional security paradigm based on national-state security does not accommodate this triangulation. What may be good to protect the national state apparatus may cost major cities and their people a high (increasingly high) price. In the dense and conflictive spaces of cities, a variety of forms of violence can be foreseen.

Moreover, new kinds of crises may result from the major environmental disasters that are looming in our immediate futures. These will further challenge the traditional commercial and civic capacities that have allowed cities to avoid war when confronted with conflict. These crises could feed the violence that can arise from extreme economic inequality, and racial and religious conflicts.

The results will be felt particularly in cities because of the often profound kinds of dependence of cities on complex systems - apartment buildings, hospitals, vast sewage systems, huge underground transport systems, whole electric grids - all of which rest on computerised management vulnerable to breakdowns. A major mock experiment by Nasa found that by the fifth day of a breakdown in the computerised systems that manage the electric grid, a city like New York would be in extremis. In Mumbai's tragedy can be glimpsed the image of a global future.

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