



POST-COVID

Security Landscape

A Conversation with Raffaello Pantucci

Interviewed by Vishal Manve, December 2020

Fletcher Security Review (FSR): Thank you for joining FSR today. To begin, what challenges do you believe countries or security practitioners will face in preventing terrorism or countering violent terrorism in a post-COVID-19 world?

Raffaello Pantucci (RP): There are going to be a lot of challenges. The difficulty with trying to make judgments about what is going to happen in a post-COVID world is that we are not in the post-COVID world yet. We are still in the midst of the pandemic, so a lot of this work and assumptions that we look into are based on assessments of what we think *could* happen.

I think a number of things will happen. First, I think we are going to see real pressure on security forces' resources. On the one hand, kinetic security forces—police and intelligence services—probably will not suffer too much. But the real dilemma will come with some of the upstream funding. Money is being used to try to stop people from being drawn to violent groups in the first place. Countering violent extremism projects will face immense challenges since it is very hard to understand and make direct causal links between the issues the programs are addressing and the ultimate threats.

We are going to see a push on budgets and that will result in cuts for security forces. These will have an impact in different ways in different places. Unfortunately, terrorist threats are global. You can have a good grip on your threat matrix, but it has links across borders which are beyond your control. This creates a potential risk if a country you are connected to does not have a grip on their security and are under the same sort of budgetary pressures, then it is possible you will see a negative knock-on effect.

I think this second pressure, on budgets, will be one that will hit us in all sorts of different ways and will create a very complicated picture. We will see a deepening of inequalities which will create a situation where you have fissures in societies that will be exposed further. Those are exactly the sorts of places in which terrorist groups like to insert themselves and their ideologies for recruitment.

In the post-COVID world—and already growing earlier—the third big pressure is the Internet. The fact is that our lives were already shifting online, but it is being pushed very aggressively in that direction now. We have seen all sorts of odd things happening, including radicalization, as a result. You just need to look at the Q-Anon phenomenon and understand this whole online radicalization is really transforming in a very complicated and aggressive way. That is going to be something we have to watch out for in the future.

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FSR: The UK's counterterrorism model has been sufficiently successful and was based on the "Four P's" model. How challenging would it be to replicate these steps elsewhere around the globe?

RP: The Four P's model was coined by the United Kingdom back in 2003 in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It is also the one that you have seen replicated in lots of other places already. I think the key lesson of the Four P's—Protect, Pursue, Prevent and Prepare—is that they basically just require practice, repetition, and effort. With time, you get better at them. In some countries, including in Europe, they do not have the same levels of experience and their security forces are not used to dealing with threats in the same way. Hence, they struggle with some of those aspects, including disrupting networks, intelligence penetration, and getting

the public ready in the instance of a terrorist attack. I think countries that have dealt with problems for a long time have a better sense of how to deal with these things than others. So, if we look at a European country like Portugal, which is very new in trying to deal with these threats, their security framework is still trying to get up to speed and their legislation will take time to catch up.

The other side of the coin deals with the upstream aspect, which is extremely complicated everywhere and, frankly,

no one quite has exactly the right recipe. Interestingly, the UK, which was considered best-in-class, is facing challenges while other countries are improving their capabilities. If you look at a country like Germany, they are getting much better at this stuff. Even Scandinavian countries have a pretty good track record. But the UK has been dropping a little bit on capabilities.

On the preventative side, it is a universal problem. Everyone is struggling and everyone is continuously trying to go up and down. On the other three P's (Protect, Pursue and Prepare), it is basically about building defenses and preparing the public. It is relatively straightforward in terms of how you need to respond—you know what you need to do, and you just stay ahead of how the threat pictures are evolving.

FSR: What do you think about the United States in a post-COVID-19 world? Do you see the rise of, or consolidation of, extremist groups due to increasing inequalities?

RP: The United States is interesting because for them the problems of extreme right-wing, libertarian, anti-state groups go back a long way, and it goes back to pre-9/11. This was always their dominant domestic terrorist threat picture. It was not really Islam that was considered the dominant threat notwithstanding a number of incidents and networks—including an earlier attempted attack on the Twin Towers in New York. However, it jumped to the



The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 was the deadliest act of homegrown terrorism in U.S. history, resulting in the deaths of 168 people. In a matter of seconds, the blast destroyed most of the nine-story building, incinerated nearby vehicles, and damaged or destroyed more than 300 other buildings / Source: FBI

top of the agenda and displaced everything else in the United States after 9/11. The United States always had a problem with right-leaning or libertarian domestic terrorist groups and it really got sidelined because of the growing dominance of Islamic terrorism as a major threat and the attention of security forces was diverted towards it. But domestic terrorism was lingering in the background. Now, with the administration of former President Trump, things escalated. We can see a trail of the problem through the Tea Party movement and people like Sarah Palin who spoke for a hard right within the Republican Party. These sorts of very far-right libertarian leaders in the Republican party are really reaching out to the same community—or a community that is not far away ideologically—that we are talking about when we look at militias.

But then what we have seen under President Trump is that these sentiments and groups have been pushed up a notch. The notion that society is extremely polarized has intensified, something that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Even without the pandemic, the polarization of society was already a really big problem that was expressing itself in the United States—the pandemic supercharged it even further. In the United States, it is not only about inequalities, but also about divisions and polarization within society.

FSR: In a pandemic scenario, how difficult will it be to garner support and funding for counterterrorism activities?

RP: If you look at most Western countries' risk registers pre-COVID, they had all listed pandemic disease as a

major threat they were going to potentially face and yet no one seems to have prepared adequately for it. It was always present as a threat. If you look at a lot of Western security budgets, the counterterrorism budget is usually protected. And the reason is that it is directly linked to national security and because terrorist attacks are visible. People are willing to let their security force have a lot of money in exchange for protecting them. The question that arises is, how far can this security blanket stretch? Your resources can cover your country but that is not where the terrorism problem stops. It comes from abroad. If you think about aviation, it is a global industry. Traditionally, the danger of aviation was always that planes do a lot of stops. A plane that started in Bangalore could have multiple stops and not every stop is secure at an optimum level; that is a huge problem in aviation security. In third-party locations, the security forces cannot necessarily guarantee that same level of coverage because of capabilities, and generally smaller budgets. In a moment when the entire country's economy is under fire, this means security budgets will also come under pressure.

For Western powers, the pressure on budgets will come under how much they are willing to spend abroad. There is a need to invest in third locations which your threat picture is linked to, but it will be harder to justify programs that are maybe trying to deal with more upstream threats, like the attraction of groups like al Shabaab to Somalis. These countering violent extremism projects or aid programs are sometimes hard to directly link to threats back to Western countries, meaning that when cuts need to be made they are more likely to come under pressure.



Storming of the US Capitol. Credit: TapTheForward/Assist / CC BY-SA 4.0

FSR: What are your thoughts on digital radicalization and recruitment amid the pandemic?

RP: Online radicalization was always a problem, and it is getting worse as time goes on. Terrorist groups are clearly using the online space more now and we can see this in the way they operate and the networks they run on. But this is, in a way, only a reflection of how our entire lives have increasingly moved online. The part I would look out for is the spread of the Q-Anon movement and similar ideologies online that do not actually come from groups. In that sense, security forces find it difficult to stay ahead since they are not even dealing with groups anymore but more amorphous communities. If they are dealing with a group, they know who they are facing—the connected ideology, the networks, and their presence on platforms like Telegram, et cetera. But if it is just disparate ideas that people are latching on to with no group structure or hierarchy, with only a part of it ultimately turning into a terrorist threat, tackling it becomes very difficult.

But the next question will be how much people are willing to trust the government with their data and people are very right to be worried about this.

FSR: How will surveillance apps be used by governments in a post-COVID-19 world?

RP: The difficulty is that people have very different views on how much they are willing to trust the government with sensitive information. This is not the same everywhere. For example, not all people get agitated with the data that Facebook has on them or concerned about the amount of data Amazon has on them. But they do get angry when the government gets their data. They have weird reactions.

In the United Kingdom, we have CCTV everywhere and people seem fine with that. Whereas in Germany they hate CCTV but everyone has an ID card, while in the United Kingdom, they tried to introduce an ID card and there was huge pushback against it. So, the public has different views on the issue. In some societies, people have adopted health monitoring apps wholeheartedly and are using them a lot—cases in point being Singapore,

China, or Israel. But the next question will be on how much people are willing to trust the government with their data and people are very right to be worried about this. Once the government has a pool of information, they are often not going to let go of it because it is useful to them in other ways. We are very likely to see it happening, and it will undoubtedly have repercussions across societies.

FSR: Do you anticipate a big shift in how conversations around counterterrorism policymaking will change due to the pandemic?

RP: No, I do not think so. Actually, I think we will see more of the same going forward. We have been talking about counterterrorism for a long time now. Most countries have worked out what they need to do now that they have not done previously, so there is a degree of learning happening in the system.

After COVID-19, there will be a lot more concern on bioterrorism potentially becoming a risk because everyone sees the impact of what it can do, but at the same time practical realities are likely to constrain groups' abilities

to do anything about trying to deploy them. In terms of policy, it is probably going to be a lot of the same going forward, just reflecting the new threats that are being looked at. Now we will have to focus on mapping the bifurcation between right-wing and extreme right-wing, as it is very difficult to map. For example, in India, you have mainstream politicians who say things that are not far off from some violent extremists. And this is true in lots of Western countries too. It is a complicated issue and raises questions of balancing and how security forces can deal with such issues. The government has had this problem for a long time and COVID-19 has made it worse.

FSR: How has the security and radicalization issue changed in the UK?

RP: In the UK, the problem has evolved, and the key aspect of the problem is that the security forces have a good grip on networks. They know what networks look like, the people behind them, and their intersections with each other and abroad. Hence, we have not seen many problematic instances and disruptions of large-scale plots in the country. The biggest problem they have is that of the lone actor—people who are inspired but not directed by groups. These people are being radicalized online with ideologies that in some cases do not make any sense whatsoever. This is the main issue right now which security forces are struggling with. If you look at the disruptions that are taking place, we see many of these kinds of people because it is harder to trace and prevent them from moving into action earlier.

Also, they do not have a clear solution to the foreign fighter problem—UK citizens who went and joined terrorist groups in Syria in particular. They have a grip on those who have come back, but mapping and dealing with those that are out of the country and sitting in camps is difficult. They are just treading water at the moment and it is a huge problem they are not dealing with. It can result in something menacing and will be a pain for probably

years to come. But those are the two biggest aspects of the threat picture for the UK at the moment. The third problem is the extreme right-wing, which is a growing concern. When we look at how young these extreme right-wing adherents are and how violent they want to be, it is quite a worrisome picture.

FSR: Could you speak about how Young China Watchers (YCW) came to be amid China's dominant rise in the global arena as a superpower?

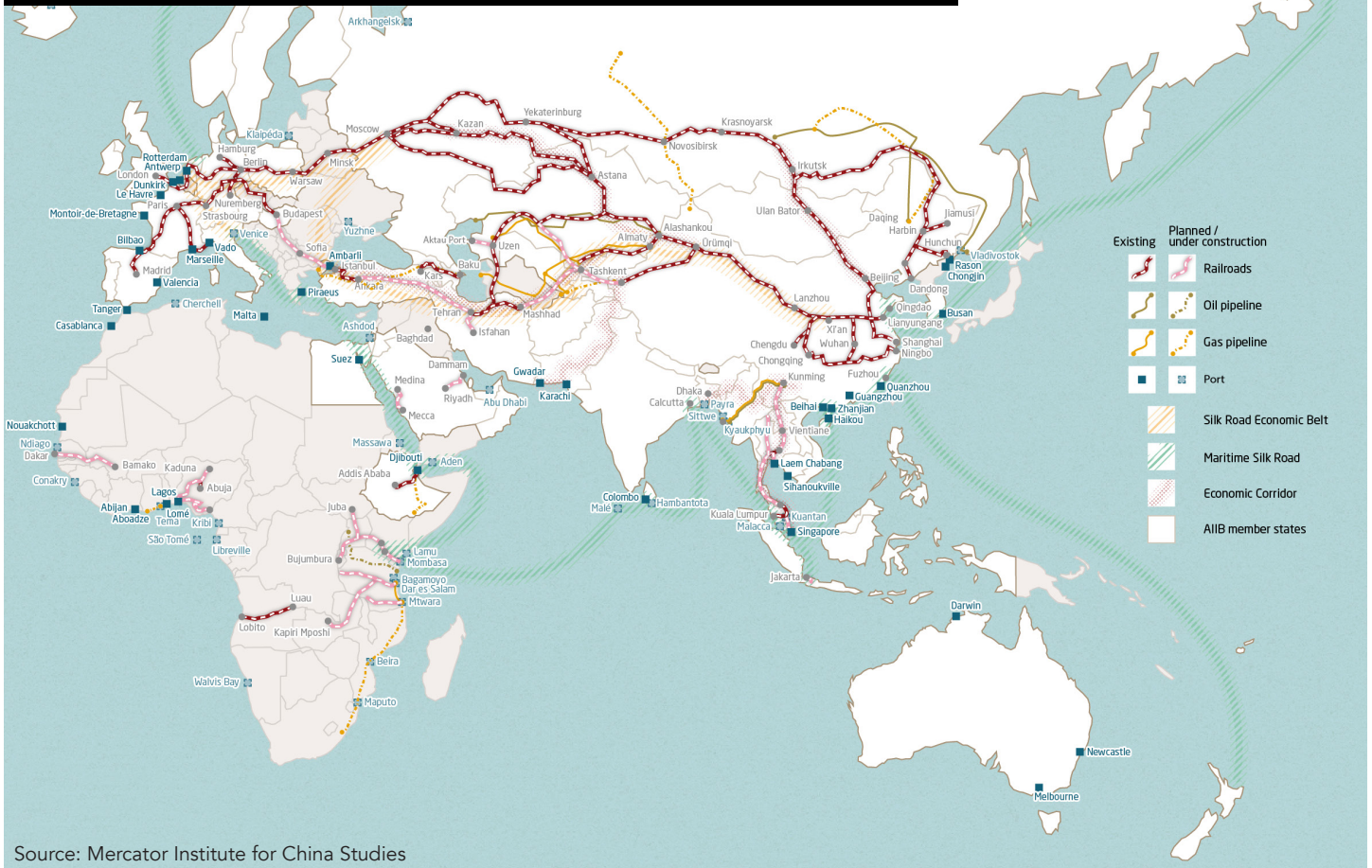
RP: YCW is a very important organization, not just because I founded it, but because we are at a pivotal moment when China is a big part of our conversations globally. We have a growing polarization on views related to China, specifically in the West. It is going in a very negative direction. What we do not want is to have a whole generation shaped around the idea that China is only an adversary. I have lived in China for four years and it is a fascinating place. I am very aware of the deep problems with Chinese governance. I am not naive in that sense. But I am also fascinated by the place and its people. What worries me is that you get this extreme polarization of views and the entire generation growing up only seeing China through the threat lens, which is negative. Eventually, there will come a time when China is no longer seen in this manner. China will always be a reality in our world. It is a country that has 1.4 billion people, so it is always going to be significant no matter what. We need to have some sort of understanding and connection. I am not a believer that decoupling is a good idea. Young China Watchers was founded because I and some friends in Beijing wanted to create a space where we could talk to other people who were interested in China, meet, listen and talk to interesting people who shared our interests. That was our foundational goal and we have been very fortunate in having lots of very eager people who want to come and participate and help the organization grow.

ENGAGING YCW COMMUNITIES AND BUILDING NETWORKS

YCW hosts roundtables and dinners with visiting experts and delegations, allowing for more focused interaction and discussions on the latest key issues. Our growing online community features diverse analysis by established and emerging experts, connecting with our members around the world.

[Read more](#)

China's Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies

FSR: As China's relationship with the West and its neighbors changed due to the Belt and Road Initiative, how did YCW's focus develop?

RP: We just wanted to create a space comprising China-interested professionals. Not all of us work on foreign security policy. It was an exception rather than a rule, and we just want to get together and talk about it. We are all people interested in China in different ways—some in the economy, others in China's role in the world, et cetera. That was the defining idea, and so the genesis was very much grounded in that. Eventually, as it grew, what happened in different chapters was that conversations would be steered around people's interests. So the idea was very much founded around understanding China, writ large. And then it is very much steered by the members and what they are interested in.

FSR: After a tumultuous relationship with President Donald Trump, what challenges or changes do you foresee for President Elect Biden on the U.S.-China front?

RP: The Trump administration has done a very good job of setting the tone and creating a physical context in the U.S. relationship with China, which means that we are on a pretty fixed course for the medium term, at least. So no, I do not think there will be any dramatic changes. I think where you will see a dramatic change will be in an approach by President Biden to work with our

allies to try to contain China. That was something where President Trump did a pretty bad job. It will be the United States taking more ownership, and I think we should not underestimate the degree to which China might decide to abruptly shift its policies.

Trump set a very aggressive, scorched-earth policy to basically destroy any connection between the United States and China so that when Biden comes in, he has no choice. If the Chinese are clever, you will see them attempting to weave themselves into the multilateral world. Hence, if China switches its policies from aggressive to conciliatory, that will catch the United States off guard, and it will have to react to that. I think we will see a shift with our allies.

Raffaello Pantucci is a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London and a Senior Fellow in the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. He has also worked at IISS, ECFR and King's College in London, CSIS in Washington and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS). He is the author of "We Love Death As You Love Life" (Hurst/Oxford University Press), a history of British jihadism, and his academic work has featured in journals like *Survival*, *The National Interest*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, while his journalistic work has been published in the *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* amongst others.