

Transnational Challenges and U.S. National Security: Defining and Prioritizing Borderless Threats

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Photography Credit: Bottom Left: Supervisory Senior Resident Agent Robert DeWitt of the FBI Des Moines Resident Agency (Omaha Division) delivers remarks during a press conference unveiling an outdoor media campaign to combat human trafficking in Central Iowa. Cover photo sourcing available upon request.

Approved by:

November 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Schroden".

Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Director
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Abstract

By their very nature, transnational challenges are murky and often intermingled, and thus are difficult to analyze. This report provides an introductory examination to these challenges in an effort to build understanding around what they are and why they matter to current U.S. national security. Through our research, we derived a definition for transnational challenges and then used that definition to identify 11 such challenges that impact U.S. national security interests today. We observe trends and patterns among these challenges, including how they relate to one another and how they may evolve over time. We end with thoughts on which transnational challenges the United States should focus on, and why.

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Approach.....	1
Organization of the report.....	2
 What Are Transnational Challenges?.....	 3
Seeking a definition	3
A proposed definition	5
Current transnational challenges	6
Observations on current transnational challenges	9
 Transnational Challenges and National Security.....	 11
Do transnational challenges matter for U.S. national security?	11
 Findings and Conclusion.....	 18
 Appendix: USG Agencies and Offices Working on Transnational Challenges.....	 20
 References.....	 25

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List of Tables

Table 1.	Current transnational challenges.....	7
Table 2.	Transnational challenges and U.S. national security interests.....	15
Table 3.	USG organization and transnational threats.....	20

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Glossary

AOR	Area of Responsibility
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CENTSEC	Central American Security Conference
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
EU	European Union
GC	Geneva Conventions
IGO	Intergovernmental Organization
IO	International Organization
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LOAC	Law of Armed Conflict
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
USG	United States government
VEO	Violent extremist organizations
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction
TOC	Transnational organized crime

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Introduction

In addition to threats from nation-states, the United States government (USG), including the Department of Defense (DOD) and the intelligence community, points to *transnational challenges* as an area of rising importance for the future. The recognition that threats to U.S. national security at home and abroad come from non-state and/or non-traditional sources that span national boundaries has resulted in an increasing demand for research and analysis on these threats. Some transnational challenges, including terrorism, criminal networks, and piracy, are long-standing and familiar; however, there are also a number of transnational challenges, such as water stress, human trafficking, and transnational organized crime that are increasingly being cited as having a direct link to U.S. national security. The USG needs to have a greater understanding of these current and emerging challenges in order to determine where they fit within the broader spectrum of U.S. national security priorities.

This report explores the realm of transnational challenges and provides an organizational and conceptual framework to better understand them. We also discuss how and why transnational challenges matter for U.S. national security and how they relate to other U.S. national security priorities. We seek to bring clarity to what is an inherently murky topic in a way that supports USG efforts to address these challenges.

Approach

We took five steps to complete our analysis:

1. We conducted historical research on transnational threats and challenges, and how the terms have been used over time.
2. We then identified commonalities between the uses of *transnational challenges* in order to derive our own definition of the term.
3. Using that definition, we identified 11 challenges and analyzed them, placing them into categories that would allow us to better understand their nature and how they relate to one another.

4. We compared the 11 challenges to current U.S. national security interests in order to identify what national security priorities they affect and gauge the extent to which they do so. To do this, we listed the six U.S. national security interests from *The Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015* and, based on their definition, posited whether each transnational challenge can potentially have a negative effect on each national security interest.
5. Finally, we developed conclusions that would highlight the implications of our findings for approaches to countering transnational challenges today and into the future.

Our data and information came from the following sources:

- An in-depth literature review of academic articles, media pieces, think tank reports, other open source documents, and USG documents and statements
- Semi-structured discussions with subject matter experts on a broad range of DOD priorities, in order to determine the breadth of transnational challenges considered by DOD and the interagency
- Extensive data mining of USG unclassified websites and other resources, to identify entities addressing transnational challenges
- A half-day event on transnational challenges—specifically on the nexus of transnational organized crime (TOC) and violent extremist organizations (VEOs)—that involved regional experts on transnational threats and current USG officials running relevant programs and activities globally.

Organization of the report

The first section of this report centers on a discussion of transnational challenges. The concept does not have an agreed-upon definition, and so we propose a definition. In the second section, we apply this definition to identify 11 transnational challenges currently affecting U.S. national security and then analyze them for themes and trends. We end with findings and conclusions on how the U.S. should approach transnational challenges going forward.

What Are Transnational Challenges?

Transnational challenges, also often referred to as transnational *threats*, can be easy to recognize but difficult to define. They tend to vary greatly in who (or what) is responsible for them; the effects they have; and even the physical form they take. Some, for example, such as cross-border crime, cyber theft and violent extremism, are driven by actors and facilitated by networks; others, such as contagious diseases are the result of social interactions. As a result, the term *transnational challenges* can present a problem to analysts and policy-makers who seek a clear and concise definition that they can use to identify effective approaches to countering them.

Seeking a definition

Having analyzed how the term *transnational* has been used over time by a multitude of entities across government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and research centers, we make the following observations about it as a concept.

First, there is no agreed-upon definition or categorization of transnational challenges other than the idea that the word “transnational” refers to entities or phenomena that are not limited to the borders of a single nation-state. But using that single idea as the sole basis for a definition is arguably too broad, since so many things have consequences across borders, including both those that are in the physical environment (the weather, for example) and those that are not (religion, for example).

Second, the term has been used frequently to make a distinction between a certain type of threat and those threats that are from state-based adversaries or static, more easily quantifiable threats, such as an adversary nation state's military size and strength.

Third, the term *transnational* also connotes complexity and murkiness, and thus can be applied to a broad range of phenomena, sometimes without precision. This is linked to the fact that, as we discuss later, challenges can come in many forms.

Finally, there are also notable differences in how individual entities and organizations—governments, NGOs, international organizations (IOs), and research organizations—use the term *transnational*. For example, the United Nations (UN) has referred to transnational threats thus: “Some of the greatest challenges to peace and

security are crimes which, while committed on national territory, permeate national borders and affect entire regions and ultimately the international community as a whole.”¹ It specifically cites terrorism, transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and acts of piracy.

As another example, the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) webpage “Transnational Issues”² defines them as “threats that do not respect national borders and which often arise from non-state actors, such as terrorists and criminal organizations.”³ The CIA’s examples include international organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism.

To further our understanding of the terms and their ramifications, we also looked at the websites and publications of a broad range of other entities and organizations⁴ focused on these types of challenges, and observed the following on the use of the term *transnational*:

- The term *transnational* is rarely explicitly defined in these sources. Rather, they cite specific examples of transnational threats or challenges to describe (rather than define) amorphous issues that extend beyond states’ borders.⁵ The

¹ United Nations, “Transnational Threats,” United Nations, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <https://www.un.orgeruleoflaw/thematic-areas/transnational-threats>.

² Central Intelligence Agency, “Transnational Issues,” Library, Jan. 3, 2012, https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/archived-reports-1/ann_rpt_1999/dci_annual_report_99_12.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ A sampling of the websites we analyzed belong to the following organizations: the Council on Foreign Relations; the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; the Institute for Security & Development Policy; the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; the Central Intelligence Agency; the Brookings Institution; the Global Fund for Peace; the United Nations; the Center for Strategic and International Studies; the White House / National Security Council; the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice; and the Congressional Research Service.

⁵ “John Brennan on Transnational Threats to Global Security,” (Council on Foreign Relations, Jun. 29, 2016), <https://www.cfr.org/event/john-brennan-transnational-threats-global-security>; “The Fragile Sahel: Transnational Threats and Sustainable Solutions,” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jun. 24, 2015), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/06/24/fragile-sahel-transnational-threats-and-sustainable-solutions-event-4937>; Institute for Security & Development Policy, “Center for Transnational Threats,” Institute for Security & Development Policy, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <http://isdp.eu/initiatives/center-for-transnational-threats/>; Fund for Peace, “Transnational Threats,” Fund for Peace, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <http://global.fundforpeace.org/tnt>; Center for Strategic & International Studies, “Transnational Threats Project,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project>.

list of specific challenges that is used to describe the term varies widely across the websites and publications we analyzed.

- The term *transnational challenges* is not exclusively used. Other terms, including *non-traditional threats*,⁶ *emerging threats*,⁷ and *transregional challenges*,⁸ are also used to describe similar things.
- Things that are transnational in nature can be cast in a negative light (as a threat, such as terrorism), a neutral light (as an issue or challenge, such as refugee flows), or a positive light (as an opportunity, such as migration). Of note, though the words *challenge* and *threat* have been used interchangeably in the literature, transnational challenges are distinct from transnational threats, and the latter should be viewed as a subset of the former.

A proposed definition

In an effort to make *transnational challenges* a more concrete, uniformly depicted concept upon which to build understanding (and since there is no commonly accepted definition), we derived a definition from our extensive research on the topic.⁹ We propose the following definition:

Transnational challenges: phenomena that are cross-border or borderless; are complex; have some bearing on U.S. national or global security; and are often interconnected.

While specific challenges can be placed into certain descriptive categories (movement of people, disease, extremism, for example), one characteristic that separates transnational challenges from a host of other national security issues is their

⁶ “Center for Transnational Threats.”

⁷ White House, “HIDTA Initiatives,” Office of National Drug Control Policy, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/hidta-initiatives>.

⁸ Chad Pillai, “Reorganizing the Joint Force for a Trans-Regional Threat Environment,” *Strategy Bridge*, Jan. 4, 2017, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/1/4/reorganizing-the-joint-force-for-a-transregional-threat-environment>; U.S. Southern Command, “Transregional Threat Networks,” U.S. Southern Command, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <http://www.southcom.mil/Focus-Areas/Transregional-Threat-Networks/>; Bradley Peniston and Marcus Weisgerber, “Dunford: New Pentagon Staff Needed to Meet Transregional Threats,” *Defense One*, Dec. 14, 2015, accessed Sep. 19, 2017, <http://www.defenseone.com/business/2015/12/dunford-new-pentagon-staff-needed-meet-transregional-threats/124469/>.

complexity and interaction with one another: many of these challenges are linked to one another by various mechanisms, ranging from geography to networks of people.

To highlight how these complex challenges can be intertwined, we offer the following hypothetical scenario (which admittedly draws from real-world scenarios): A terrorist organization's mass violence in a particular country sparks the large-scale movement of civilians across a national border as they try to escape the violence. In their efforts to find safety, these refugees flood into the border region of a neighboring country, into a community where water is scarce (i.e., people do not have enough water to meet their demands). When the refugees arrive, the water scarcity is made worse by the increased demand resulting from their arrival. As a result, given the lack of clean water for both the original and newly arrived populations, dangerous diseases, such as cholera, emerge and spread as people living in crowded conditions are forced to drink contaminated water. In this environment, criminals also take advantage of those refugees who are not protected, promising them a better life in another country, where they end up being exploited by traffickers. Also a local insurgent group with ties to Al-Qaeda is recruiting followers within the refugee camps, offering them a salary and protection if they join Al-Qaeda's ranks.

Current transnational challenges

In this section, we identify and discuss significant transnational challenges today. We used our proposed definition above and isolated 11 transnational challenges that are commonly discussed in the literature we reviewed. These are outlined in Table 1. The first column provides the name of the challenge; the second, a description of the challenge; and the third, examples of the challenge and, if applicable, the main actors involved. We acknowledge that there is significant overlap between some of these challenges, but we are including them all for the sake of completeness.

Table 1. Current transnational challenges

Transnational Challenge	Description	Examples / Actors
Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)	Criminal activity, including trade in humans, weapons, and drugs, that is channeled through organized, cross-border networks	Human trafficking and smuggling; drug trafficking; drug cartels; gangs; piracy; money laundering, fraud, and extortion; illicit networks; intellectual property theft
Terrorism / Violent Extremism	The use of violence and intimidation with the goal of carrying out attacks against civilians for political or ideological ends; acts of terrorism and those who carry them out	Terror and extremist groups (e.g., Al-Qaeda, ISIS); terror attacks
Movement of people	Forced or voluntary movement of people across borders	Forced: human trafficking; natural disaster response; displacement; refugees Semi-voluntary: Economic migrants; urbanization; effects of rapid population growth/demographic shifts
Changes in the natural world/ Risks to energy and the environment	Climate, weather, resource, and energy-related issues that have cross-border or trans-border implications for people, governments, or international organizations	Water stress; food security; climate change; natural disasters; natural resource management and scarcity; energy security; global commons and collective goods issues (e.g., "greenhouse" gases, "pollution tax," limits on carbon dioxide emissions)
Threats to public health	Health-related challenges or crises that are cross-border or can become cross-border	Communicable and infectious disease epidemics (e.g., the West African Ebola virus epidemic, 2013-2016; the Zika virus epidemic, 2015-16); bio-weapons

Spread of ideology	A system of religious, social, political, economic, or philosophical beliefs offering a certain way of life that is proliferated internationally; the thoughts, ideas, and inspiration for political or social change	Crime-terror-insurgency nexus; radicalization, such as jihadism and Communism
Digital / cyber connectivity	Cross-border cyber-based activities	Cyber-attacks; cyberterrorism/cyberwarfare; data security; interoperability; cyber espionage; hacking
Weapons proliferation	The illicit spread of weapons across borders	Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs); small arms
Humanitarian crises	Challenges, conflicts, and developments that affect human welfare and have the potential to lead to mass human suffering	Natural disasters; genocide and war crimes; disease epidemics; slavery; refugees; migrants; gender/religious/ethnic discrimination
International economic flows	Challenges related to international financial trade, financial inequality, and global financial crises	Global recessions; international development; trade deals; economic and monetary unions; customs unions; common markets; multilateral free trade areas
Legality, international justice, and norm-building	National and international laws that impact cross-border issues at the state, group, and individual levels; the diffusion of norms across borders; disagreements over legal or norm-based issues	Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs); United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC); Geneva Conventions (GCs); United Nations (UN); European Union (EU)

Observations on current transnational challenges

Looking across and comparing these 11 transnational challenges, we make the following observations:

First, transnational challenges come from a variety of sources, including people, networks, and the physical environment. Some are led by individual actors who are acting within well-developed networks. These include terrorist and violent extremist organizations, proliferation networks, and transnational organized criminal groups. Other challenges are driven by large-scale social, political, humanitarian, and technological shifts, such as the movement of people, the spread of ideologies, cyber connectivity, and humanitarian crises. A third set of challenges are driven by changes in the natural environment, such as threats to public health through disease, resource scarcity, and disruptive climate change.

Second, some transnational challenges were originally local or national challenges but in recent years have become transnational as the global environment has evolved and changed. For instance, though specific diseases and ideological movements have shifted over time, threats to public health and the spread of ideas are not new phenomena. The emergence of the global system and the ease and speed with which people can move from place to place, however, means that a contagion that breaks out in one location can quickly spread to another as people travel from country to country. The 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak, for example, crossed international borders, killing over 11,000 people in multiple countries, including Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, the U.S., and Mali.¹⁰

Similarly, the democratization of the internet and the ability for people in all parts of the earth to use it as a platform to spread ideas differs drastically from how ideology was spread decades ago, when people relied on other media, such as radio and print. In 2014, when ISIS moved across northern Iraq and Syria establishing its caliphate, it made extensive and innovative use of social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to garner support from its followers around the globe in ways previously unseen.¹¹

¹⁰ Staff, "Ebola, Mapping the Outbreak," BBC News, January 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28755033>.

¹¹ Julia McQuaid et al. *Adaptive and Innovative: An Analysis of ISIL's Tactics in Iraq and Syria*, CNA, December 2015, DRM-2015-U-012267-Final (FOUO).

Third, and related to the previous point, some notable newer transnational challenges have emerged in recent decades. For example, cyberspace issues and the use of cyberspace to inflict harm on countries or individuals has emerged with the digital age. Similarly, variations in climate and precipitation, and frequent, large-scale natural disasters are more recent transnational challenges that impact people and societies across national borders.

Fourth, some are clear security threats that the U.S. has devoted attention to for a long time, while others have been reprioritized over time. For instance, terrorism and VEOs are universally seen as a security issue within the United States. But other issues—humanitarian crises, international economic flows, international justice, and threats to public health—have flowed into and out of the realm of U.S. national security priorities, depending on the priorities of U.S. political administrations and the conditions associated with these challenges at various times historically.

Fifth, transnational challenges do not function independently from one another; some interact and overlap in ways that affect how they should be addressed. Individually, each challenge may not reach the threshold of a U.S. national security priority. However, seemingly disparate challenges interact with, lead to, or exacerbate others, making their effect stronger. Consider this example: Terrorist organizations can conduct business with criminal organizations to raise money for their cause. One area in which this can happen is in the trafficking of people who are taken from their homes by a VEO, sold, and then moved to another country where they are forced into labor, usually in an illicit market such as prostitution. Similarly, terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, can do business with criminal syndicates to move valuable commodities on the black market. These scenarios show how the potential interconnection of these challenges can increase risks to national security, particularly as they potentially expand in scope and scale over time. They also show how those USG entities responsible for addressing each particular challenge would have to cooperate and coordinate to be effective. They would require a response from multiple USG agencies addressing the range of issues from human trafficking to transnational criminal networks to terrorist financing.

To summarize, in this section we outlined the concept of transnational challenges, including a discussion of their amorphous nature, which has led to a dearth of uniform definitions across sectors. We proposed a definition of *transnational challenges* that allowed us to scope and identify phenomena that are commonly discussed in terms that match our definition. We then identified important trends among the challenges that are helpful for understanding them.

Transnational Challenges and National Security

Over the past century, U.S. national security concerns have tended to focus on major threats coming primarily from nation-states. Over time, however, threats and challenges that are transnational in nature have become increasingly integrated into the U.S. national security discourse. The most prominent example is terrorism, which, after the attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, was elevated to among the top national security threats to the United States. Terrorism is an example of a transnational challenge that is of obvious importance to U.S. national security, since terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS actively seek to harm the U.S. and its interests at home and abroad. Other challenges, such as contagious diseases and criminal networks, are less obvious in their direct relevance to U.S. national security. Contagious diseases, for example, can be viewed narrowly as a threat to public health, but not to national security per se. Similarly, criminal networks are often considered to be law enforcement issues, not issues of national security.

Many of the transnational challenges we identified in the previous section do not appear to align with traditional U.S. national security priorities. Therefore, in this section we discuss the relevance of those challenges to U.S. national security. The goal of this discussion is to support efforts to prioritize these challenges, not only relative to each other but also against the range of traditional, state-based threats, so that policy makers and those involved in allocating USG resources can make better informed decisions as the national security landscape becomes increasingly complex.

Do transnational challenges matter for U.S. national security?

First, three of the transnational challenges on our list of 11 are indisputable priorities for U.S. national security today by many measures. These are VEOs, cyberattacks, and WMD/small arms proliferation. Below we discuss each in turn.

VEOs: Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has made counterterrorism against organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS a top national security priority, and has dedicated significant resources to defeating such groups, including a 16-year military

campaign that spans multiple countries and has included the invasion of two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. A multitude of USG documents, ranging from the strategic (at the national level) to the operational (e.g., military theater campaign plans), reflect the fact that countering these terrorist groups and VEOs is central to U.S. national security. More recently, the U.S. military has been using the “4+1” framework of challenges¹² which aligns China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia as the “four” and VEOs as the “plus one,” again indicating that VEOs are one of the top five national security threats to the United States. Many other foundational national security documents, such as the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, the *National Military Strategy of the United States*, and the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, also reflect this priority. Additionally, in May 2017, U.S. defense secretary Jim Mattis called ISIS (a VEO) a “transnational, long-term threat.”¹³ For the administration, “success” against ISIS and similar groups is dismantling the group’s *transnational* reach, “down to a point where the locals can handle” the threat.¹⁴

Cyberattacks: In recent years, the threat of attacks in cyberspace has become an elevated priority for U.S. national security in response to attacks on U.S. cyber infrastructure from a range of state and non-state entities. Reflecting its importance, in August 2017, President Trump announced that U.S. Cyber Command would be elevated to a unified combatant command (from a sub-unified command within U.S. Strategic Command). Clearly stating the importance of this transnational challenge, the DOD statement said that the changed status of the command reflects the “growing centrality of cyberspace to U.S. national security.”¹⁵

Weapons proliferation: Stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and nuclear weapons in particular, has been a central tenet of U.S. national security policy for decades, the foundation of which is the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Originally, key nuclear proliferation concerns for the U.S. were focused on the prospect of state adversaries developing a nuclear

¹² Joseph F. Dunford Jr., *Hearing to Receive Testimony on U.S. National Security Challenges and Ongoing Military Operations*, U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, Sep. 22, 2016, 2016. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/16-71_09-22-16.pdf.

¹³ “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Mattis, General Dunford and Special Envoy McGurk on the Campaign to Defeat ISIS in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room,” Department of Defense, May 19, 2017, accessed Aug. 18, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1188225/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-mattis-general-dunford-and-sp/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Richard Sisk, “Cyber Command to Become Unified Combatant Command,” August 17, 2017, Military.com.

capability. In more recent years, the U.S. has been focused on stopping non-state actors (such as a terrorist organization) from gaining access to such a weapon. To this end, the USG dedicates significant resources towards this issue, as demonstrated by its involvement in major efforts such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons and by the current administration's continuing efforts to curb North Korea's attempts to develop such weapons.

Beyond these three top-priority transnational challenges, others also matter for U.S. national security. We point to two indicators that reflect the USG's ongoing concerned and focused efforts:

First, the USG is organized to address them: In the appendix of this document, we provide lists of agencies across the USG with offices, cells, and directorates dedicated to the 11 transnational challenges in this report; many of these government initiatives are not related to the three top priorities cited above but are dedicated to other transnational challenges such as migration, crime, trafficking, smuggling, and piracy. While the list of USG entities is not exhaustive, it identifies dozens of offices in existence, showing that the USG has put considerable resources into addressing these other challenges in a way that suggests they are important.

Second, DOD leadership statements highlight them: A multitude of recent statements by leaders in the USG (and DOD) attest to the fact that transnational challenges beyond VEOs, cyber, and proliferation are important for national security. Below are two examples to illustrate this point:

- Addressing a meeting on UN peacekeeping in 2016, General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, highlighted the transnational nature of many of today's conflicts and national security challenges, specifically mentioning violent extremism, transregional crime, and civilian displacement.¹⁶ Of note, the latter two examples overlap with two challenges—the TOC and movement of people—of the 11 we identified.
- U.S. Southern Command's Admiral Kurt W. Tidd has said that the transnational threats facing that command's area of responsibility (AoR) range from "natural disasters that impact our communities, to potential terrorists transiting our

¹⁶ Jim Garamone, "Transnational Threats Need Transnational Solutions, Dunford Says at U.N.," Department of Defense, Jun. 18, 2016, accessed Aug. 16, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/803035/transnational-threats-need-transnational-solutions-dunford-says-at-un/>.

countries, to violent criminal networks harming our citizens.”¹⁷ He went on to say: “Everywhere we look, we see a blurring of the lines between global and local, between crime and acts of terror, between public security and national defense.”¹⁸ It is not surprising, given the direct threat to the continental United States, that the U.S. military has a longstanding concern about transnational challenges in Latin America. The UNITAS maritime exercise has been an annual event since 1960. Hosted this year in Lima, Peru, the multilateral exercise addressed transnational challenges including transnational criminal organizations, piracy, and natural disasters.¹⁹

Taking our analysis a step further, to get a more granular sense of which transnational challenges matter the most for U.S. national security, we compared the 11 transnational challenges on our list to the stated national security interests of the United States as detailed in *The Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, the most recent unclassified version of the biannual strategy document. Table 2 below shows this comparison: boxes with an “x” indicate that the transnational challenge as defined in our study touches on, or affects, a particular national security interest.

¹⁷ Lisa Ferdinando, “Southcom Commander: Evolving Threats Require Unified Approach,” Department of Defense, Apr. 24, 2017, accessed Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1161270/southcom-commander-evolving-threats-require-unified-approach/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Terri Moon Cronk, “U.S. Forces Work With Partners in Numerous Military Exercises,” Department of Defense, Jul. 17, 2017, accessed Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1250003/us-forces-work-with-partners-in-numerous-military-exercises/>.

Table 2. Transnational challenges and U.S. national security interests

Transnational Challenge	U.S. National Security Interests					
	The Survival of the Nation	The prevention of catastrophic attack against U.S. territory	The security of the global economic system	The security, confidence, and reliability of our allies	The protection of American citizens abroad	The preservation and extension of universal values
Transnational Organized Crime (TOC)			X	X	X	X
Terrorism / Violent Extremism	X	X	X	X	X	
Trends in the movement of people		X	X	X		
Changes in the natural world/ Risks to energy and the environment		X	X	X		
Threats to public health		X	X	X		
The spread of ideology		X				X
Digital / Cyber connectivity	X	X	X			
Proliferation	X	X	X	X	X	
Humanitarian crises			X	X	X	
International Economic Flows			X	X		
Legality, International justice and norm-building			X	X	X	X

We highlight several observations below from our comparison in Table 2:

First, when taken together, transnational challenges as a whole affect three U.S. national security interests most:

1. ***The security of the global economic system.*** Of the 11 transnational challenges we identified, all have the ability to negatively influence, or even harm, the global economic system. The demand-driven global economic system struggles to adhere to international laws or norms as long there is a strong demand for illicit commodities and a willing supplier that can do business. Many transnational challenges exist in this space. Examples of these include

illicit drugs, the trade in counterfeit goods, and the smuggling and trafficking of people.

2. ***Security, confidence, and reliability of U.S. friends and allies.*** In countries with weak or little governance, bad actors such as VEOs and criminals have exploited the relatively permissive environment. Rampant corruption can also thrive in these places. These forces can further undermine governance and weaken states, thereby affecting the ability of those states to function transparently as cooperative partners to the U.S. and to remain reliable and trustworthy.
3. Additionally, U.S. allies around the world are dealing with social, political, and economic shifts. In Africa and the Middle East, demographic bulges, resource shortages, struggling economies, and deep social fissures make it harder for U.S. allies to meet the needs of the populations. Meanwhile, populations in Europe and across northern Asia are aging and in decline. Around the world, people are moving from the countryside into cities in search of work where they are often exposed to cultural differences, alienation, and disease. They also are moving across borders and seas in growing numbers, accepting great risk, and placing strain on nations that receive them.²⁰ All of these factors can potentially harm U.S. allies and partners in ways that weaken their ability to maintain strong relationships with the United States.
4. ***The protection of American citizens abroad.*** U.S. citizens abroad have been targeted by acts of violence, extortion and kidnapping carried out by various transnational actors, including transnational criminal organizations and VEOs. U.S. citizens have also been random victims of terror attacks abroad, both as targets and random bystanders who have witnessed such violence. Terror attacks on soft targets across the world make it impossible for the USG to ensure the safety of U.S. citizens abroad.

Additionally, the interconnectedness of businesses, schools, universities, and families around the world increases the likelihood that serious risks to public health no longer harm only the citizens of the country in which the risk emerged. The spread of disease is a threat to all people in high-density, interconnected regions, regardless of nationality. Both the West African Ebola virus epidemic and the Zika virus affected U.S. citizens both abroad and at home. While the U.S. has the infrastructure to contain the spread of many, but not all, diseases, other countries in which U.S. citizens live and work struggle to contain communicable diseases.

²⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America*. http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf.

Second, three transnational challenges impact “*the preservation and extension of universal values.*” VEOs threaten “universal values” by promoting their own radical views and in some cases imposing their own value structures on populations they control. Nowhere is this clearer than in the form of governance based on an extreme interpretation of Islamic law imposed inside ISIS’s so-called caliphate.

Third, only one transnational challenge—proliferation—has the potential to affect the “*survival of the nation.*” Nuclear proliferation is the only transnational threat that has a direct bearing on the survival of the United States. Nuclear war could lead to destruction on a massive and irrevocable scale. No other transnational challenge can cause such immediate and enormous harm.

To summarize, many transnational challenges decrease U.S. national security. Some, such as VEOs, cyber, and proliferation, are characterized as top priorities for U.S. national defense across strategic documents. Their high-priority status is also reflected in the significant resources the USG directs towards addressing them. Others, such as TOCs, environmental changes, and epidemics, are recognized as national security issues, but do not receive the same level of attention, or resources. These latter challenges, taken together, have the potential to strongly impact U.S. national security interests that relate to the global economy, the protection of U.S. citizens abroad, and the stability of U.S. friends and allies. While they do not pose an impending threat to the survival of the country, they are significant and if allowed to grow over time or occur simultaneously, could be damaging to U.S. national security in major ways in the future. For instance, a cyber-attack that (planned or otherwise) occurs at the same time as other national crises, such as a large-scale natural disaster, epidemic, or economic crisis, could have severe, wide spread national security implications.

Findings and Conclusion

Of the 11 transnational challenges we identified in this report, some are simply of higher priority to the USG than others. VEOs, cyberattacks, and WMD proliferation all fall into this category. These three challenges pose an arguably imminent and significant danger to the U.S., and, in the case of proliferation, could threaten its survival in a worst-case scenario. Not surprisingly, from an internal USG perspective, efforts to address and counter these three are mature and have been well resourced for a long time. The USG has significant infrastructure to address and manage the broad range of activities stemming from all three of these challenges.

Other transnational challenges do not impact the U.S. in an existential way and, as a result, receive less attention and fewer resources. But this range of challenges, which are lower level and seemingly less threatening (at least in the short term), are also very important to U.S. national security, for four reasons:

1. They appear to be less well understood, both on their own and how they are related to one another.
2. Many appear to be growing in prominence as a natural outgrowth of our increasingly interconnected global community, and thus may become worse over time.
3. There is evidence to suggest that they are also becoming increasingly intermingled, adding another potentially dangerous dimension to their ability to impact national security.
4. They have the potential to erode key economic, governance, and social institutions (and international norms) in a way that, if left unchecked, can have potentially dangerous (albeit less immediate) outcomes for the U.S. and its partners.

In particular, we believe that three of the transnational challenges we identified should be viewed as increasing in prominence as concerns for U.S. national security. These are:

1. Transnational criminal organizations (and their relationship to VEOs)
2. Changes in the natural world and issues of resource scarcity

3. Current and emerging changes in populations and the movement of people, including urbanization and the emergence of “mega-cities.”

Looking forward, we believe the USG should pay increasing attention to these three transnational challenges, to include examining the structure of its agencies, mechanisms for addressing these challenges via interagency coordination processes, and allocation of resources. Additionally, we believe the research and analysis community should increasingly examine these challenges, in order to support improved USG decision-making and actions to address them.

For its part, CNA has established the Program on Transnational Challenges to serve as an integrated, cross-cutting research program that focuses on both traditional cross-border and “borderless” threats (such as terrorism) and new areas of complex, inter-connected trends—including transnational criminal networks, resource security, and emerging trends in global demographics. The program’s focus is to better understand not only the direct effects of these challenges on U.S. national security, but also the complex second-, third-, and fourth-order impacts that are often difficult to identify and decipher. We believe this understanding will lead to better, more effective approaches to preparing for and responding to these challenges and how they will influence U.S. interests at home and abroad.

Appendix: USG Agencies and Offices Working on Transnational Challenges

Table 3. USG organization and transnational threats

Department	Office / Bureau / Agency
Department of Homeland Security	Office for International Technical Assistance
	Office of Policy, Customs and Border Protection
	Office of Policy, International Affairs
	Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Agency for International Development	Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance
	Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance
	Bureau for Global Health
	Bureau for Global Health, Office of Infectious Diseases
	Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean
	Office for Conflict, Peacebuilding, and Governance
	Bureau of Food Security
	Bureau for Africa, Office of Sustainable Development
	Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment, Global Climate Change Coordinator
Department of State	Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment, Global Water Coordinator
	Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs
	Office of the Secretariat for Countering Violent Extremism
Department of State	Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment

Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for African, East Asian, Pacific and South and Central Asian Affairs
Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, Western Hemisphere and European Affairs
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Office of Policy, Planning, and Public Diplomacy
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Office of Security and Human Rights
Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Office of Threat Finance Countermeasures
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Analysis for Terrorism, Narcotics and Crime
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Narcotics and Crime
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Regional Offices
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of Environmental Quality and Transboundary Issues
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of International Health and Biodefense
Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Office of Assistance for Africa
Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Office of Assistance for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas
Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Office of Population and International Migration
Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
Office of Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy, Office of the Deputy Coordinator for Program Results and Impact Monitoring for Epidemic Control
Office of Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy, Office of the Deputy Coordinator for Strategy and Global Health
Office of Global AIDS Coordinator and Health Diplomacy, Office of the Representative for Global Health Diplomacy
Office of Global Women's Issues
Office of Global Food Security , Special Representative for Global Food Security
Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for African, East Asian, Pacific and South and Central Asian Affairs

Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, Western Hemisphere and European Affairs
Bureau of Energy Resources, Office of the Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Analysis for Africa
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Analysis for Near East and South Asia
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of Counter-Proliferation Initiatives
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of WMD Terrorism
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of Conventional Arms Threat Reduction
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Non-Nuclear and Counter-Proliferation
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of Environmental Quality and Transboundary Issues
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of Global Change
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of International Health and Biodefense
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Office of the Special Envoy for Climate Change
Office of Emerging Security Challenges
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Office of Maghreb Affairs
Bureau of African Affairs, Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance
Bureau of African Affairs, Office of the Coordinator for Countering Boko Haram
Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism
Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, Office of Africa, Europe and the Near East Programs
Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, Office of Western Hemisphere Programs
Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism, Office of the Coordinator for Regional Affairs and Multilateral Affairs
Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions

Department of Agriculture	Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Analysis for Terrorism, Narcotics and Crime
	Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Narcotics and Crime
	Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Regional Offices
	Bureau of International Law Enforcement Affairs
	Bureau of International Organization Affairs, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Global Issues
	Office of Peace Keeping Operations, Sanctions, and Counterterrorism
	Development Resources and Disaster Assistance Division
	Office of Country and Regional Affairs
	Forest Service
	International Operations Division, Office of Country and Regional Affairs
Department of Defense	Office of Sustainability and Climate Change
	Office of the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
	Joint Chiefs of Staff, J5, Deputy Director of Trans Regional Policy
	Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Stability and Humanitarian Affairs
	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Programs
	Defense Threat Reduction Agency
	Joint Chiefs of Staff, J5, Deputy Director of Trans Regional Policy
	Office of the Director for Transnational Threats Policy
	Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Threat Reduction and Arms Control
	Office of the Director for CBRN Defense Policy
	Office of the Director for Cooperative Threat Reduction Policy
	Office of the Director for Global Threats
	Office of Combatting WMD
	Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter Narcotics and Global Threats
	Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office for Political Military Affairs
	Office of Counter Terrorism
	Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Southeast Asia
	Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism

	Office of the Director for Afghanistan Policy and Strategy
	Office of the Director for CT Partnerships
	Office of the Principal Director for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia
	Office of the Principal Director for the Middle East
	Office for Transborder Security Policy
	Office for WMD Terrorism and Counter-Proliferation
	Office for WMD Terrorism and Threat Reduction
National Security Council / Executive Office of the President	Office of the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism
	Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism
	Office of the Director for Development and Democracy
	Office of the Director for Humanitarian Coordination
	Office of the Special Assistant to the President and Sr Director for Africa
	Office of the Special Assistant to the President and Sr Director for the Middle East
	Officer for Africa
National Intelligence Council / Intelligence Community	Officer for Transnational Threats
	Officer for Western Hemisphere
	National Counterproliferation Center
	National Intelligence Council, WMD and Proliferation
Joint Interagency Task Force	JIATF South, Office for Political Military Affairs
	JIATF South, Office for Transregional Policy
Office of the Director of National Intelligence	Office for Near East Affairs
	Office for South Asian Affairs
	Office for Transregional Threats
	Office for Africa Affairs
Department of the Treasury	Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes, Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence

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