

The Three Layers of Interconnectedness

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What would our world look like if we understood that everything is interconnected? But REALLY understood it!

That question drives my understanding of national security and all the inter-related global issues and systems crises we currently face. Because we understand now that we live in an interconnected world, it behooves us to understand what interconnectedness is, and what it means for our policies on national security.

Interconnectedness is at the heart of systems thinking. In 35 years of studying this phenomenon, I've come to see that there are layers of meaning, levels of insight that, once understood, have immediate and significant implications for how we interact with the world.

Layer One: We're All in This Together. At this first level, we understand that we live in a world where interdependence reigns. In terms of national security, this means that global problems and their solutions are cross-boundary, cross-sector, multi-stakeholder affairs. What happens anywhere affects everywhere; what one actor (individual or group) does affects others. Ultimately, this means that the well-being of any nation depends on the well-being of others; we exist in a web of mutual dependence. As Mother Theresa said, 'We belong to each other.'

This has profound implications for the changes we must make in our thinking about national security, for no longer can the US 'go it alone.' Complex global issues require collaboration between nations but also with non-state actors from many disciplines. It also takes us into territory of the counter-intuitive, where the more we work for the legitimate interests of others the more we serve our own interests. This alone necessitates a huge shift in traditional US security thinking and popular culture, which still values individual strength. It also means that national security is, in some sense, an oxymoron, for only with global security is any one nation truly secure.

Layer Two: Connect the Disconnected. When we understand interconnectedness more fully, we come to see all the ways we have accepted separation, fragmentation, and disconnection as normative. If, indeed, everything is interconnected, then our task is to mend that which is broken, unite that which is separate, and bring together disparate pieces into an integrated whole.

In this context, our stove-piped bureaucracy and our polarized political system impede our ability to act on our interdependence. Whole-of-government, interagency efforts, and bi-partisan commissions are attempts to correct this, as are initiatives that reach out to engage actors on the global stage where we have previously practiced isolation.

However, there are other implications we need to consider:

- We need to insure our policies connect across time, seeing the relationship of past, present, and future – an especially challenging practice in an American

culture that, unlike older civilizations, traces its past back only a few hundred years, and in a corporate and political environment that looks toward the next election cycle, the next quarterly report.

- We need to connect across differences. This means we must include a whole new set of diverse voices in our policy-making processes; do better at taking into account cultural, historical, and sociological differences and worldviews; and seek to find the common ground and common humanity with those we feel most alienated from.
- Great and continued pain is a signal that profound disconnection is calling for healing. Unhealed wounds fester, as much in the body politic as in the human body. In the international community the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and the India-Pakistan relationship over Kashmir are important unhealed wounds, continuing to resonate around the world in various and ever-more-virulent forms – until they are resolved in some way, the foundation of our global security remains at significant risk.

Layer Three: All My Relations. As we go even deeper into an understanding of interconnectedness we come back to where we started, that is, to what Native American and other ancient wisdom traditions have told us from forever, namely, that there is only one family of life on and with the planet. The implications of this sound simple at first, but on further analysis show a need for a profound transformation of our assumptions, beliefs, and strategies.

This is true in our relationships with other peoples, because in a living web the nodal points where various strands intersect are all about relationships. The fact of being in relationship with all others on this planet is a given; the only factor we can influence, then, is the quality of those relationships. Every national security decision we make should ask, ‘Does this improve the quality of the relationship?’ If not, the web is further weakened.

All My Relations is also extremely relevant to our relationship with the natural world. One family of life means that human beings are an integral part of – not superior to, separate from, or in control of – an intricate web in which all life forms play a unique role while also relying on each other for the well-being of the whole. As we face issues of climate change and global warming; food, water, and mineral scarcity; de-forestation and desertification; degradation of soils, oceans, and air; peak oil; species loss; and other environmental disasters-in-waiting, we must realize that the old paradigm of man having dominion over nature for his own benefit is not only not sustainable, it actually poses a series of grave threats to our security.

At core, if we really understood this deep level of interconnectedness, we would understand that the earth is not an inert set of rocks and minerals to be exploited, but a living being which includes us as part of, not apart from, its entirety. To Western mind this is a radical notion; indigenous peoples have known this always. And yet, we are gradually coming to it. The environmental movement, the religious Care for Creation movement, the views of Earth from space, and the realization by the national security

elite that climate, energy, and other environmental issues are indeed critical elements of our national security landscape are all indications of a growing awareness of what it means to be one family of life sharing a single vital home.

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