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Modern tribes – the new lines of loyalty

By Daniel Shapiro

The predominant form of conflict in the world is no longer international, and the traditional tools of diplomacy are no longer as effective. So how should we deal with this new reality?

We need to first understand the nature of contemporary conflict. For years, the nation-state held primary responsibility for defining political, social, and cultural identity. It gave all of us meaning, and helped us feel safe and connected to something bigger than ourselves. But with the end of the Cold War and the rise of global interdependence, the power of the nation-state declined. And all of us now must define who we are in this fast-paced, interconnected world.

In this complex situation, the key is to recognize that the fault lines of modern conflict revolve around tribes. But not traditional notions of tribes. The modern tribe is an identity-based group held together by a sense of kinship. As such, we all belong to multiple tribes based upon our religion, ethnicity, political stance, nationality, and other dividers.

And some of these tribes have more power than others. Multinationals such as the big oil companies resemble a tribe, and their presence alone in a nation-state can have an impact on intrastate and international conflict. Well-networked terrorist organizations often function as tribes, and 9/11 demonstrates the extent to which people are willing to sacrifice for their tribe.

Unfortunately, many current security measures fail to address the tribal motivations of groups in conflict. Iraq is an obvious case in point. While it is now clear that tribal warfare between the various ethnopolitical sects escalated violence, dealing with these tribes in a systematic and pre-planned way could have mitigated some of the manifest friction.

Or consider the plethora of recent conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes Region, all which have become epicenters of tribal conflict in the form of armed rebellion, secessionist movements, and power struggles between ethnic groups and local warlords. Colonial boundaries drawn without regard for tribal lines - whether ethnic, religious, racial, or family - tend to exacerbate these conflicts.

Again, how do we deal with this new tribal reality?

Prevention is worth its weight in gold. Rather than waiting for the next terror attack or for another Darfur, policymakers must focus on how to reduce the emotional tensions between various tribal stakeholders around the world. The key is to identify the lines of tribal division and to develop governmental and nongovernmental processes that bind groups together in a new, overarching identity of solidarity. With a strong enough sense of shared identity, groups can work through their historical animosities and humiliation, strengthening their shared identity.

Consider the experience of South Africa. As civil unrest came to a crescendo, a diverse set of groups rallied around the need for societal healing, and they worked together to create the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission was developed for the people and by the people. Despite its shortcomings, relatively little racial violence has manifested in the many years since the first democratic election.

The United Nations and other global institutions are now orienting to the new realities of our tribal world, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides an example of the types of dialogue and intervention necessary to overcome divisions. These institutions should expand efforts to create the conditions for divided tribes to come together, listen to one another's stories, and jointly develop processes for moving forward.

In particular, policymakers dealing with tribal conflict must answer three critical questions. First, where are the tribal lines of loyalty? Second, what are the primary substantive and emotional interests of each tribe? Third, in what ways do the various tribes share a common identity or historical narrative that can draw them together toward peace?

These are difficult questions. But if they are not addressed, conflicts will escalate and terrorist attacks will increase. Given these stakes, it is not a gamble worth taking