Day 2- April 4, 2006

What are National Security Threats? - John Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy, University of Chicago

Mearsheimer provided an assessment of the threat environment for the next 20 years. His remarks were confined to direct military threats and centered along three lines: threats from the great powers, threats from rogue states with WMD, and threats from non-state terrorists.   However, he reminded the audience that non-military threats do exist (e.g., genocide, global warming).

He defined "great powers" as those countries that have the economic and military capacity/capability to be a potential peer competitor to the US and project power to other regions. The US has no peer competitors today and for the immediate future. China and Russia are considered to be great powers but are still weak in comparison to the US. China is rising, with its population 5 times that of the US and its wealth projected to be 2/3 of the US GNP.

Mearsheimer defined "rogue states with WMD" to include Iran, DPRK, Syria, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein. These states are not direct threats to the US. The threat posed by these states to the US is overblown by the current administration and national security experts. They do not have the offensive capability to attack the US. Those states want WMD because they are the best deterrent against any US military actions. There are four dimensions to this threat:

- States using WMD as blackmail - Implausible/not good idea, since the US also has nuclear weapons there would be a credibility problem.
- States threatening use when US military forces try to conquer them using conventional means - This would involve the use WMD as a shield. It is important to note that Saddam Hussein would only use WMD (if he had any) if his survival and the survival of his society was in question.
- States threatening use to deter US influence.

- States transferring WMD to terrorist groups - Unlikely because states would never be confident that the transfer could not be detected and traced back to them, making it a very high risk activity.

The non-state actor (NSA) is the real threat in the current and future threat landscape. The real threat is Al Qaeda. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) needs to be focused only on those organizations that threaten the US because terrorism is not a seamless web. Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad are not the US's problem.   Al Qaeda is the prominent adversary here. With regard to the terrorist problem in Iraq, one needs to remember that terrorism was not a problem before the US invaded and occupied the territory. The two explanations that are often given on why these NSAs hate the US are that they hate the US for who the US is (clash of civilizations) or for what the US does (US policy, occupations, support for Israel, use of sanctions in the 90s in Iraq). Polls and anecdotes suggest that they hate the US more for what the US does. Mearsheimer answered the question of whether al Qaeda is an immortal enemy by stating that they would not be hard to deal with since it is difficult for them to acquire and use WMD. He argues this point with the previously mentioned notion that states don't like non-state actors that give them trouble. Al Qaeda is a threat in that it could bring down governments.

Interesting insights from Q/A includes:

- The greatest non-military threat is global warming/environmental.

- Nuclear weapons are the greatest WMD threat because of their cascading psychological effect on society. They also cause greater physical damage than the chemical or biological varieties. Biological weapons are a threat, but they are hard to develop to the degree that they can cause widespread destruction.