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Robert D. Kaplan, chief geopolitical analyst for Stratfor, served as the keynote speaker for the 2014 Army War College Strategy Conference.

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WASHINGTON (Army News Service, April 11, 2014) -- Twitter, Facebook and other types of social media are contributing to global instability, said Robert D. Kaplan, chief geopolitical analyst for Stratfor -- a team of intelligence experts.

The use of social media, he explained, has been shown to unite and rally demonstrators at a moment's notice, enabling them to focus their energies on toppling regimes in just a matter of days. An example would be the use of it during the so-called Arab Spring, which began in December 2010.

Kaplan was keynote speaker at the 25th Annual Strategy Conference in Carlisle, Pa., sponsored by the Army War College, in partnership with the Joint Staff/J7. His remarks and those of others are not official U.S. Army doctrine. Rather they are meant to inform the Army of possible challenges it faces in the coming years and decades, officials said.

FAILED STATES

Failed, collapsed or weakened states pose a regional security problem and even a national security threat for the U.S. and its Army, Kaplan said, defining a weak or failed state as one where travel outside the capital can be dangerous -- places like Syria, Iraq, South Sudan and Yemen.

Social media is not the only factor that will increasingly destabilize the world in the next 20 years, he said.

Ethnic and religious sectarian problems will continue to fester and create failed states in places like Africa and the Middle East, areas he compared to the post-Roman Empire Christendom in 4th, 5th and 6th-century Europe, where doctrinal battles and violence occurred between various sects.

Syria, Iraq and the Central African Republic area examples where that is occurring and Kaplan believes it will further spread as passions increase.

Another factor in the rise of failed states, he said, is the end of colonial rule and the strongmen who followed.

Like it or not, he said, the European powers sliced up the world in spheres of influence and domination, where protest and chaos was effectively quashed.

When that domination ended in the 1960s, strongmen -- who were seen by their people as leaders against imperialism -- emerged. Since these dictators now felt like they had moral authority, they governed how they pleased, he said, adding that it wasn't always in the best interest of their own people, but at least they maintained tight control.

But with the era of colonial rule and strongmen ending, people are getting restless and want change, he said; however the change each tribe, ethnic or sectarian group seeks may be very different and this results in friction and clashes.

WEAK INSTITUTIONS

One of the most important factors creating global instability, he said, are weak institutions that Americans take for granted; things like the departments of motor vehicles, water and electric companies, police and firefighters. These are not top-level government agencies, but are services that make society function.

In vast swaths of Africa and Asia, these institutions are weak and in some cases nonexistent, he said. Weak institutions in turn give rise to feeble state identities. Feeble state identities in turn breed discontent and anarchy.

That discontent then often manifests itself in militant, radicalized groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which can create regional security problems. The kinds of people that join these types of groups, he said, are more willing to die for a cause than they would be for the state.

Non-state actors, he said, are also empowered by new technologies that have the potential for doing a great deal of damage; for instance offensive cyber capabilities and plastic explosives that can fit inside a pocket. A very small group of people with ideologies and these types of weapons can cause a great deal of instability.

There's not much the U.S. will be able to do in the coming years to address failed states, he said, because the money to do it might not be there. The U.S., however, can take selective actions it deems important using its special operations capabilities.

Meanwhile, he said, the Army and other services remaining strong can serve as a deterrent to those who would do America harm. In other words, even if the Army isn't engaged in direct combat, its strength will dissuade potential aggressors.

DEALING WITH CHINA

As if failed states aren't bad enough, Kaplan said there's plenty to be concerned about with respect to non-failed states like China and Russia.

For centuries, China was effectively separated from India by the Himalayas. Then, new technologies made the world a much smaller place.

Now, the Chinese are building warships and routinely sailing in the Indian Ocean and they're building airfields in Tibet for fighter aircraft. India too is building warships and is using its satellites to spy on

the Chinese.

This can cause a great deal of mutual suspicions and mistrust, Kaplan said.

The Chinese are mimicking what the U.S. did in the 19th and 20th centuries in the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. made the Caribbean its own lake and controlled the Panama Canal -- the passage between the Atlantic and Pacific.

In China's case, officials look at the East and South China seas -- and increasingly the Indian Ocean -- as part of their strategic sphere of influence. In other words, it's their Caribbean.

For now, it isn't in their interest to attack the U.S. because their military is not as strong as the U.S. and they can take their time building it up and gaining experience in using new military technologies, he said. Also, Kaplan doesn't believe the Chinese are in meetings planning a world empire.

The problem for the U.S. with regard to China, he said, is that China will face internal instability over the coming decades because of an economic slowdown and tumultuous ethnic and social transformation.

When that occurs, the best way for China's leaders to hold sway over their people will be to dial up nationalism, he said. That nationalism would take the form of provocations to its neighbors.

DEALING WITH RUSSIA

With respect to Russia, Kaplan said it too is acting in the same way the U.S. has in the past, dominating countries close to it like Ukraine, which he said the Russian people consider part of their heritage.

Throughout history, the Russians have felt the need for a buffer zone between their country and Europe, especially since it was periodically invaded by the French, Germans and others. America, he said, has been insulated from that threat by two oceans.

Russia's need for buffers has not gone unnoticed by its eastern European neighbors, who are becoming increasingly uneasy, as Russia has proved willing to use force in Crimea and as it builds up its military forces elsewhere, he said.

Poles, Romanians and others are not reassured that they'll get military assistance if needed from Western Europe, whose armies have been downsized much more than U.S. Army, he said. As well, Europe has become dependent on Russia for its energy needs, so this gives the Russians a great deal of leverage.

Because of Eastern Europe's mistrust of getting help from the rest of Europe, Kaplan said they've turned increasingly to the U.S. for help, participating in U.S.-led exercises and contributing troops in Iraq and Afghanistan with the hope that in the future, the U.S. will remember their loyalties.

PARTNERSHIPS

So what can America do in the coming decades?

Besides maintaining a strong military, Kaplan said the U.S. can partner with other powers, India and Japan, for instance.

India views the U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean, for example, as a counter to China's buildup. And in turn, he said, the U.S. values India's military, although there isn't a formal treaty like NATO in place.

The other thing the U.S. can do, he said, is to organize its interagency structure in a more vertical manner, like the British did in the 19th century and earlier with its East India Company. Economic, political and military agencies worked hand-in-hand in foreign policy, although today that policy would be viewed as imperialistic.

The U.S. military can use the vertical model to its benefit in national security by working more closely with the Department of State and agencies like the U.S. Agency for International Development.

An important area of national security where Kaplan sees the U.S. going in the right direction is the continued development of its home-grown energy requirements, which makes America less reliant on energy imports from places not always friendly to the U.S.

Besides his work for Stratfor, Kaplan, is a national correspondent for the magazine "The Atlantic," author of "Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and End of a Stable Pacific," and in 2011 and 2012, he was chosen by "Foreign Policy" magazine as one of the world's "Top 100 Global Thinkers."

The 25th Annual Strategy Conference in Carlisle ran April 8-10.