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NBC TERRORISM AND CHALLENGES FOR DETERRENCE STRATEGY

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We will never surrender to terror America will never tolerate terrorism
Wherever they come from, wherever they go, we will go after them
We will not rest until we have brought them all to justice
President Clinton, April 1996

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in international relations, but the nature of the threat is taking on frightening new dimensions in an era of weapons of mass destruction and global access The diversification of potential terrorists, ranging from political groups to religious fanatics to individuals motivated solely by political revenge, further complicates government policy-making to deter terrorist actions The number of incidents of international terrorism, defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience," has declined since the 1970s but the death toll has risen [1] As governments have demonstrated more skill at handling hijacking and hostage crises, terrorists have adjusted their tactics to more lethal bombings Asymmetric attacks against the U S are more likely in this era of our sole superpower status where most opponents recognize our dominance in conventional warfare These trends bode ill for the possibility of terrorists moving up the scale to the threat or use of nuclear/biological/chemical (NBC) weapons for even greater impact on societies and governments

This paper will look at the challenges faced in applying deterrence strategy to one subset of terrorism of growing concern over the next decade – the threat of NBC attack by foreign terrorists against the U S homeland Under what conditions is deterrence more or less reliable against this threat, and what other elements of strategy would complement deterrence?

[1] 1996 Patterns of Global Terrorism Report (U S Department of State) p 1

The Threat: T = C x I x V

In an algebraic analogy, threat can be defined as the product of our adversary's capability to inflict harm, his intention to act, and our vulnerability to the attack Reducing any of these factors reduces the threat The NBC threat is unusual, however, in that the perception of the threat level may be greater than a cool and calculated assessment of risk would suggest, because of the public's fear of the type and number of casualties and the impossibility of building a tight defensive shield in an open society This public perception will be an added factor as its government weighs the assessment of the threat against the costs of counter-terrorism policies and against the need to assure the public of adequate protection

Analysis of the threat calls for a breakdown of the general category of NBC terrorism, both between nuclear and bio/chem weapons and among types of terrorist Assembling even a simple nuclear device requires access to nuclear materials and facilities which appear at the present time beyond the reach of non-state terrorists, and state sponsors of terrorism are likely to be reluctant to breach the nuclear taboo (The bio/chem international taboo is not as strong, unfortunately, as evidenced by the use of such weapons in regional and internal conflicts already) A less dramatic, smaller scale, but more readily obtainable nuclear threat would be using medical or industrial radiological wastes to cause sickness Biological or chemical weapons, on the other hand, are much easier to acquire, even without official assistance, since many of the materials and manufacturing facilities are readily available in civilian industrial or medical uses Delivery methods can vary from missiles to aerosol cans The U S may be able to reduce terrorist capability through international regimes to control nuclear materials and critical bio/chem ingredients, or by the more direct, but costly, means of preemptively destroying NBC facilities, but, by and large, terrorist NBC capabilities are out of our control

The terrorist's intention or will depends on his commitment to his cause, on his grievances, or on what U S policy or action the terrorist wants to change or deter Most analysis on influencing intent assumes a rational actor in the terrorist who is seeking a political demand In such a case, which would generally include state-sponsored terrorism, the inherent uncontrollability of NBC effects and the risk of losing popular support for the terrorist's cause militate against the use of NBC weapons unless the terrorist feels compelled to go to extremes to gain attention A threat of use as a negotiating lever is more likely than surprise use of NBC, when the terrorist objective is to obtain specific political change

In these cases the U S has some room to maneuver to reduce a potential terrorist's will The underlying cause for threatening terrorism may be amenable to diplomatic solution (for example, the proposed Northern Ireland settlement or the Middle East peace process) Increasing the cost to the terrorist, i e the likelihood of retaliation, or convincing the terrorist that U S policy will not be changed under duress can also reduce the factor of intention in this case

Considerations of personal cost, world opinion, or the likelihood of changing U S policy are less likely to affect the intention of the independent terrorist, motivated more by an ideology or by a desire to retaliate for U S behavior abroad, and not subject to a state-sponsor's control The Ramzy Yousef's of the world may not delay their terrorism while demanding change of the U S , nor be deterred by assurance of punishment The absence of a state-sponsor means no third party is weighing the risks to its interests of attacking the U S homeland

Our vulnerability is the last factor and the one most subject to our direct control, but reducing vulnerability to terrorist use of NBC is by no means easy As noted above, the issue is not only physical vulnerability of the U S to NBC attack, but also the public perception of our vulnerability even though few foreign terrorists have been successful in the U S Terrorists may

be tempted to play on U S public fear and use NBC threats as a psychological force multiplier in an asymmetric attack Protecting a large and open society from NBC attack is virtually impossible, especially given our national commitment to freedom from extensive government controls Reducing vulnerability must focus, then, on detection and intelligence efforts to permit prevention of the attack and on consequence management to reduce the costs in casualties and damage in the event of an attack

A broader issue yet remains in the final evaluation of threat from NBC terrorism Would the likely level of an attack, given our best assumptions of capability and will on the part of potential terrorists, truly endanger vital national interests (survival, well-being, values) of the U S ? The size and resiliency of our society, both its political and economic structures, would allow the U S to survive any likely terrorist attack The threat is more to our values – the importance we attach to human life, to our freedom of action from heavy protective measures, and to our confidence in our government's capability to defend us In considering the strategy of deterrence, we must acknowledge that we are not able to provide airtight protection to our homeland, while at the same time recognizing that we are not facing an ultimate survival threat, provided that our government does not appear totally helpless in the face of an NBC threat We cannot totally prevent terrorism, but our objective can be to deter terrorism through detection and counter-threat of assured punishment and to deny terrorists' objectives by reducing the effects of terrorism sufficiently that we are not pressured into meeting the terrorists' aims

Deterrence: D = C x I x P(C) x P(I)

Deterrence is "the prevention of action by fear of consequences brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction"[2] Just as threat is a function of the adversary's capability and will to inflict harm, our ability to deter depends on our capability and

will to take appropriate action and on our opponent's perception of that capacity and intent In adopting a strategy of deterrence, we seek to instill in our opponent both a fear of unacceptable punishment and also serious doubt that his objectives can be obtained

Deterrence is not a comfortable strategy As a strategy of negative aim, it seeks to maintain the status quo, and its success can only be measured by something not happening Furthermore, deterrence is, in a sense, a cooperative relationship, our opponent must be able and willing to be deterred Finally, in our system and culture, deterrence strategy like other strategies must rest on moral and ethical underpinnings

What, then, are the problems encountered in applying deterrence to a terrorist threat of NBC attack? As the sole remaining superpower, the U S retains significant military capability to retaliate against or to preempt terrorist attack if other (political and ethical) conditions permit The ethical conditions can be simply put as a requirement, even if unspoken, to respond asymmetrically, rather than ourselves breaking the taboo against NBC use which is in our wider interest We must also target the terrorists themselves or closely-related supporting facilities in the case of state-sponsorship In possible responses to international terrorism, the use of directed or controlled violence against the responsible terrorists seems justified when less radical means of effective response are not available When noncombatants are knowingly endangered, however, even if such risk is necessary to permit effective response, the case becomes much less clear "[3] We cannot use the terrorist's own strategy of threatening innocent hostages in his home community

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[2] *Transforming Defense National Security in the 21st Century* National Defense Panel (December 1997)
[3] Anthony E Hartle A Military Ethic in an Age of Terror," *Parameters* (Summer 1995) 126

The political conditions are more complex A primary consideration is the ability to identify, reliably and quickly, the source of the terrorist threat, which puts a premium on our intelligence assets The deterrent value of a promise to retaliate increases if punishment is seen to be not only sure, but speedy Even more than retaliation after attack, preemptive action requires a strong case that can be made in the public arena of global opinion, if we are to deny the terrorist even the propaganda fruits of his threat

To make our intent clear calls for the use of declaratory policy against terrorism We must make clear our intent to prevent and/or punish terrorist use of NBC to the greatest extent and with all appropriate means, as well as our refusal to change policies under blackmail At the same time, we will need to retain some ambiguity as to the exact means to be used The context of our foreign relations as well as whether the terrorism is state-sponsored or independent will condition the means we choose to respond Where we might use a bomber attack against Libya as a state-sponsor, we will not hold an ally responsible in the same fashion for terrorists using its territory for a base Rather, we will use all diplomatic tools to insist on rigorous law enforcement against the terrorists Indeed, deterrence is rarely a strategy in isolation A variety of policy tools in a comprehensive foreign policy strategy will be necessary

Given that we have the capacity to deter and the will to use that capacity because of the heinousness of NBC weapons, we are left with the problem of the terrorist's perceptions or willingness to be deterred[5] No counter-threat is inherently deterring In making our intent clear in declaratory policy, we assume we are dealing with rational opponents who will weigh the costs and benefits of NBC attack on the U S As noted above, state-sponsors or terrorist groups seeking political change will have the most to lose, both physically and in the realm of public opinion, from an attack Against such parties, a deterrence strategy is most likely to succeed (as

it appears happened, for example, in the case of our warnings to Saddam against NBC use in the Persian Gulf War) It is much less clear that anything short of preemption will dissuade the independent ideologue or fanatic, who seeks to hurt the U S without regard to personal consequences It is one thing to deter political blackmail and another to deter plain revenge

U.S. Policy

Current U S policy is 1) make no deals with terrorism and do not submit to blackmail, 2) treat terrorists as criminals, pursue them aggressively, and apply the rule of law, and 3) apply maximum pressure on states that sponsor and support terrorists by imposing economic, diplomatic, and political sanctions and by urging other states to do likewise [4] While not explicitly ruling out the use of military force, the policy emphasizes a law enforcement approach and the denial of terrorist objectives

This declaratory policy makes no specific mention of NBC terrorism, which may call for some modifications to the general policy NBC terrorism is in a special category because of the potential magnitude of casualties and damage from NBC weapons It may not be possible to refuse all negotiations in the face of a credible NBC threat, but no lasting or significant political concessions should still be our policy Most important is to retain or restore, if necessary, the firewall against the use of NBC weapons in our homeland We should make clear to state-sponsors of terrorism and to terrorist groups that the use of military force, in addition to all other sanctions, is a serious possibility in retaliation for the threat or use of NBC against the U S Although we must keep some diplomatic ambiguity in our deterrence policy in the case of an independent terrorist without state support, we should make it clear that a government that does not fully cooperate with law enforcement efforts to apprehend the terrorist will be punished

[4] 1996 Patterns of Global Terrorism Report (U S Department of State), p 2

Furthermore, we should leave open the option of preemptive action if we have adequate indication of a terrorist intent to use NBC weapons If we can prevent the terrorist attack through intelligence detection and arrest of the terrorists, that is to be preferred, but a preemptive military strike to destroy the capability for NBC use should not be ruled out as an ultimate protective measure

As deterrence is not a policy to be followed in isolation, neither should the U S have to go it alone against the threat of NBC terrorism Coalitions may be useful in deterrence as well as fighting wars Previous attempts at global anti-terrorism regimes have foundered on the definition of terrorist – the one nation's terrorist is another nation's freedom-fighter problem On the other hand, international agreements to combat specific terrorist threats, such as aircraft hijackings and diplomatic hostage-takings, have been achieved NBC use would seem an obvious threat of such generally accepted heinousness that multilateral agreement could be reached on condemning its use and promising cooperation to punish such terrorists The value of such an international regime is to raise yet further the political cost to potential state sponsors of becoming an international pariah Properly written, it can also give us international moral high ground for sanctions, or even retaliation, for NBC terrorism

As the U S has already experienced with conventional terrorists, the law enforcement approach also often requires international cooperation We seek other nations' cooperation in seriously prosecuting or quickly extraditing terrorist suspects In return, we can expect demands for reciprocal treatment of other's accused terrorists Cooperation may also depend on reducing the vulnerability of our friends to NBC threats Our policy should include providing technical assistance for detecting NBC weapons and for reducing the consequences of NBC use, as well as intelligence sharing

The last element in our policy of deterring NBC terrorism is consequence management If prevention fails, the U S government must not only promise assured punishment of the terrorists, but must lessen the impact on our citizens This is not only a humanitarian responsibility, but plays its own role in deterrence To the degree that our capability to cope with NBC attack on our population and on our vital infrastructure is known, the potential terrorist knows both our vulnerability and his likelihood of gain are reduced and may be dissuaded by the resulting cost/benefit analysis

Implications for U.S. Force Structure

The policy discussed above for dealing with a terrorist NBC threat against the homeland does not call for any radical change in U S military force structure Within the U S the lead on countering terrorism should remain with the law enforcement agencies The military plays a necessary supporting role with its special expertise and resources, especially in the area of consequence management The domestic emergency response agencies should draw on the R&D and technical assistance of the military's NBC response teams for training and help in decontamination and treatment The civilian disaster response infrastructure should have crisis plans and stockpiled supplies throughout the country for rapid response to an NBC attack

Abroad, we will probably choose to use law enforcement and diplomatic approaches in most cases of terrorism Nonetheless, as argued above, the NBC threat is a special case that could more likely call for the use of military force in retaliation and preemption Precision-guided munitions, a strong SOF capability, and robust intelligence means will be needed to meet the political and ethical demands for precise attribution of the threat and for proportional and targeted response

Conclusion

The NBC terrorist threat against the homeland is frightening to imagine, but not a critical threat to U S survival in a rational assessment of the risk Our current counter-terrorism policy of no deals, promised punishment as criminals, and sanctions against supporting states could be strengthened by explicit reference to reserving the option of using military force against an NBC threat In any event, deterrence is most likely to succeed against state and political group terrorists Against the independent fanatic threat, we should increase our efforts at intelligence detection and build up our civil-military cooperation and infrastructure for consequence management

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