Strategic Insight

A Strategic Response to Terrorism: A Framework for U.S. Policy

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Many observers have suggested ways that the United States might respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Some of these proposals have been presented in a systematic manner. Many of these suggested strategies are threat-based, and most are directed specifically at the al-Qaeda network. While any effective strategy must address existing threats, developing a strategy based on one type of event can lead one to focus on the tactical and operational aspects of terrorism, perhaps missing some of the more important strategic dimensions. A threat-based perspective often produces only a short-term response. Thus, policies based on recent experience may miss important options.

Other studies suggest conceptual approaches that are objectives-based. One widely cited and relatively comprehensive framework has been developed by the ANSER Corporation; it has been disseminated widely via its online Homeland Security journal and newsletter.[1] It offers an objectives-based approach that provides a phased response to a range of threats. It posits a strategic cycle of deterrence, prevention, preemption, crisis management, consequence management, attribution, and response. Another systemic approach is contained in the recently crafted United States National Security Strategy. It outlines an immediate response to terrorism: a short-term campaign to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations through direct action, preemption, and denial of sponsorship, support, and sanctuary. In the longer term it calls for a "war of ideas" to criminalize and isolate the terrorists, coopt the support of moderates, diminish the underlying conditions of violence, and employ public diplomacy to provide information, truth, and hope to the citizens of societies from which terrorism rises. And underlying both of these policies is the effort to protect and defend the United States through homeland security initiatives.[2]

The framework here incorporates many of these previous ideas about what constitutes an effective counter-terrorist strategy, while expanding them to respond to a more systematic conception of terrorism. The framework outlined here is time-phased from pre-attack prevention, through trans-attack mitigation to post-attack response. It also incorporates strategies to foster long-term dissuasion of terrorist attacks and assurance. It focuses on terrorism as a tactical, operational, and strategic issue and on how to defeat terrorist attacks against the United States and the appeal of terrorists to their target audience abroad. It aims to marginalize the terrorist message and defeat the terrorist's strategy.

Pre-Attack Components

A systematic pre-attack, anticipatory response to terrorism might incorporate four complementary elements, each directed against an essential component of terrorism. Many of these actions constitute the immediate response to 9/11. The four suggested here are *preemption, protection*, and *preparation*, all toward *prevention*.

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- *Preemption* strikes at terrorist operations: motivations to act, organizational structure and organizational support activities, and especially the terrorist infrastructure. Specific actions to blunt, divert, deflect, or arrest an attack are possible by limiting critical support, sanctuary, planning, communications, and movement. Even the flattest terrorist organizational structure with the fewest nodes of contact has a vulnerable critical support infrastructure. With targeted intelligence, overt or covert government action can block operational terrorist activities.
- *Protection* is physical security and other prophylactic measures that can limit the extent of the damage produced by specific terrorist weapons and tactics. Hardening and denial-of-access designs can protect high-risk facilities. When confronted with a hardened or secure target, terrorists will usually go elsewhere to seek a softer avenue for attack. Broadening the scope of effective protection to a wider set of potential targets will continue to complicate terrorists' plans. Even access control procedures, if exercised and advertised, can deflect terrorists to other targets. These efforts also can help prepare the targeted national government or citizenry against the psychological impact of terrorism.
- *Preparation* must be aimed at the ultimate targets of the terrorist strategy. Terrorism is a physical attack intended to produce a psychological effect; an effective counter-strategy must have a psychological component. Cases of successful preemption and prevention, as well as heightened protection measures, must be made public to send clear messages to both the terrorist and the target. Letting the terrorist know that we are prepared will act to multiply the deterrent effect of preventive and protective efforts. And increased citizen knowledge and participation will shore up confidence and resolve, and help blunt the impact should an attack occur. Public involvement in preparatory exercises and education programs will impart the protective power of knowledge to citizens and officials.

Prevention of the full range of terrorist attacks is extremely unlikely, but even one success will save lives and property, and it will contribute to the success of the overall counter-terror strategy. Identification of terrorists' plans, detection of repeated surveillance of potential objects of attack, or knowledge of weapons construction activities can lead to direct intervention to prevent specific acts, or at least categories of acts. General or targeted warnings and increased vigilance can be effective. By stopping individual acts, limiting the extent of the damage that these acts can inflict, and bounding the extent of the psychological effects produced by an attack, prevention will limit the terrorists "success" and thus the attractiveness of terrorism.

Trans-Attack Components

Actions taken in immediate response to a terrorism incident should seek to end the attack, limit further damage and injury, and minimize both the physical and psychological effects of the attack. A trans-attack policy cannot be undertaken "on the fly," but rather must be carefully pre-planned and exercised.

- *Crisis Management* is the set of actions taken immediately to end a terrorist attack or a series of attacks. Crisis management works to bound and end further damage from the terrorists. Its focus is rapid information gathering and investigation to provide a complete picture of the act, actor, weapon, and victim and to assess whether the current phase of attack has ended. It also acts to preempt or prevent, disrupt or deflect, follow-on actions by the terrorists. Crisis management sets in motion the long-term chain of events that will culminate in criminal investigation and prosecution and in military, intelligence, economic, and diplomatic efforts to defeat the terrorist's strategy. It creates the basis for a transition from immediate defensive actions toward the counteroffensive against terrorism.
- *Consequence Management* deals with the damage inflicted at the immediate scene of the attack by rescuing survivors, providing medical assistance to the injured, and limiting damage. It focuses on mitigation of death, injury, and damage, especially in the event of a chemical or biological attack. Consequence management involves coordinating the

efforts of first responders through the rescue phase, setting the stage for longer-term recovery efforts and reconstitution.

Mitigation is key to "turning the corner" from defense to offense via a planned response. Both crisis management and consequence management are essential components of the strategic response to any incident of terrorism. Some level of tension between them, however, is inevitable in practice. They have separate purposes, and they are normally undertaken by different agencies with very different cultures. When a single attack site is involved, the dual imperatives of managing the crisis—the incident and potential follow-on incidents—and managing the consequences—rescue and damage limitation—are going to conflict to some degree. These two imperatives at some point will find themselves in competition for scarce resources. To limit friction, pre-crisis communication among these agencies, detailed and joint planning, and exercises are critical. Lives and the overall effectiveness of a response depend on preparatory actions.

Post-Attack Components.

Faced with incomplete information, framed by lingering anger and high emotion following an attack, and still awaiting analysis, post-attack actions must be measured against the norms of law and overarching societal values. They also must provide a basis for a long-term, synergistic strategy to thwart the terrorists.

- *Interdiction* is similar to the pre-attack component of preemption. Interdiction employs intelligence, military, economic, political, and diplomatic tools to affect the terrorists' infrastructure. "Follow the money" is central to interdiction. Sanctuaries, communications, training camps, planning, and movement can be targeted to interdict terrorist operations. Both overt and covert means and unilateral and coalition efforts, can be employed to prevent further terrorist operations and to locate the tactical elements of the terrorist organization to aid in their destruction.
- *Attribution* is the critical precondition for interdiction efforts, and for a longer-term response. Painting the terrorist as an unsympathetic criminal can have positive effects, furthering interdiction and information gathering efforts. But a specific terrorist must be directly linked to the attack. A legal case must be made both for the legal process to follow and for the larger court of international public opinion to forge an global coalition against the terrorists.
- *Recovery* is important because it directly enhances public safety, and because it produces positive psychological effects. In the aftermath of a catastrophic attack, creating the appearance and reality of recovery can lead to a partial reversal of the psychological impact of the attack by restoring confidence and "normalcy." In the event of a biological or radiological incident, this "turning of the corner" that demonstrates containment and reversal would be critical.
- *Information* sharing between the target population and its government is crucial. Fear is enhanced by uncertainty, and it is important within the limits of security to keep the public fully informed, or else they might fall victim to their worst fears—founded or unfounded. Recovery can help bound both uncertainty and fear. The psychological component of the response must be strong to offset the psychological impact of terror. Pre-attack planning, especially public education and preparing an effective post-attack information system, would enhance this post-attack communications process.

Response reflects the full range of law enforcement, intelligence, military, economic, political, and diplomatic actions that occur after an act of terrorism. Interdiction efforts cripple the terrorists' operational infrastructure and seek to capture or destroy terrorist cells and weapons caches, thereby limiting the ability of the group to mount further actions. Active defensive efforts that include surveillance, continued hardening of probable targets, protective access denial and screening at airports and ports can be more effective once a terrorist cell or scheme is identified.

Under-reaction is dangerous, but overstatement of the threat and over-reaction can also create problems. The response cannot protect everyone from everything, but any appearance of government failure would serve to heighten the psychological effects of the terrorist action.

Long-Term Components

The long-term response to terrorism is to take the offensive. The focus of strategy must shift from protecting targets to an active campaign against the terrorist organization that draws on the entire spectrum of capabilities available to the state and international community.

- ***Isolation*** combines preemption and interdiction efforts to isolate physically the terrorist from active supporters and sponsors, to cut access to financial resources, suppliers of weapons, training facilities, and sovereign sanctuaries. Terrorism is warfare by the weak, and isolation deprives terrorists of access to the few strengths and assets they possess. Potential supporters and recruits no longer receive terrorists' messages, and are thereby deprived of the opportunity of making even an indirect contribution to attaining terrorist objectives.
- ***Retribution*** is not retaliation, which is often described as a response in kind to a terrorist incident. Terrorism is an asymmetrical form of attack, and a direct force-on-force, in-kind response may be ineffective or even play into the hands of the terrorists. Retribution, by contrast, implies punishment without limiting its nature and direction. It allows direct retaliation or asymmetrical punishment in a range of forms and from varied directions; policymakers should not be constrained in either the scope or character of their response. Retribution should produce a strategic effect on the terrorists, and limiting retribution to a response in kind might miss opportunities to further the overall counter-offensive.
- ***Prosecution*** helps to diminish the stature of the terrorist by focusing on the criminality of the terrorist and by building a wall of illegitimacy between terrorism and the political objectives that terrorists seek. Effective attribution and prosecution furthers the isolation of terrorists, enhances the full set of retribution efforts, and enhances confidence—while further dispelling the element of fear—within the target population.
- ***Reconstitution*** restores function within the target site or system, ending the direct effects from the terrorist act. It also eliminates evidence of the terrorist attack so it does not present a set of recurring images to continue to traumatize the target public. With the full restoration of "normalcy" comes a sense of balance that can lead to the further reduction in fear, ending the instrumental leverage created by the terrorist effort to use violence to attain political objectives.
- ***Dissuasion*** is directed at the terrorists, their organization, supporting states and groups, and even the overt, legitimate, non-violent adherents to their cause. Through a directed and measured response to terrorism and its infrastructure, the physical and psychological offensive against the terrorists and their cause, and the protection and preparation of the U.S. government and public against the terrorist objectives, the terrorist should come to the realization that they cannot succeed by attacking U.S. citizens, property, or interests. Their cost-benefit and risk assessments should tell them to look elsewhere—it is futile to attack the United States.

Long-term efforts are intended to assure the public that the government is responding effectively to the terrorist threat, thereby making Americans and their allies harder psychological targets. Clear and informed understanding of the threat and government response, confidence, and trust built through deliberate public information efforts blunt the fear factor and thus limit the potential that an attack will achieve a major psychological blow. Terror incidents cannot be always prevented, but with effort and information their ability to advance the terrorists' cause can be limited.

Ultimate Response

By responding to terrorists and terrorism, terror victims and targets, and to the worldwide audience that terrorists seek, the end result of a strategic response to terrorism should be the *marginalization of the message* of terror and *defeat of the strategy* employed by the terrorist.

- ***Marginalization of the terrorists' message*** is a key end goal of counter-terrorism strategy. Terrorists want to send a message through the target public to the target government. Recruitment of active and passive supporters and obtaining support that can be transformed into further terrorist operations are what results when the message is communicated. Everything the terrorist needs and hopes to attain depends on the effective transmission of the terrorists' message, and this is terror's ultimate strategic vulnerability. According to David Fromkin, "By itself, as has been said, terror can accomplish nothing in terms of political goals; it can only aim at obtaining a response that will achieve those goals for it."[3] Block the terrorists' message and you defeat their strategy.

Conclusion

Deterrence by denial is the ultimate objective of the terrorism response framework. Although most counter-terror strategies begin with deterrence, their aim is to prevent an attack, not to deter the terrorist strategy. Some also describe deterrence of terrorism in terms of deterrence by punishment. While it is possible to deter a specific attack by threatening punishment, it is unlikely to succeed in terms of deterring a terrorist campaign in the first place. This framework depicts deterrence as the net result of operational, tactical, and strategic programs that range from pre-attack policies through the long-term response to a terrorist incident. This is ultimately deterrence by denial. Delegitimized and marginalized, the terrorists' message falls on deaf ears, and recruits no longer rush to their cause. They are denied sanctuary, funding, and logistics support. Their organization, communication, and movement is disrupted. Their planning, training, and access to weapons is curtailed. They are denied victims. They are denied the ability to generate fear and as a result are unable to influence targeted government. With this across-the-board denial, the terrorists and the terrorists' message are marginalized, and their strategy is rendered impotent. At that point terrorism is deterred.

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For related links, see our Homeland Security Resources.

References

1. See Randy Larsen and Dave McIntyre, "A Primer on Homeland Security: Strategic Functions, Threats, and Mission Areas," ANSER, 2001.
2. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The White House, September 2002), 6.
3. David Fromkin, "The Strategy of Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 53 (July 1975): 689, 697.