The War on Terrorism: Is the US Winning?

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Theme: This paper assesses the United States strategy against international terrorism as it has evolved over the past five years. Focusing on the international dimension of American actions, special attention is paid to the scope and internal consistency of declared objectives, as well as to the suitability of the means assigned to the pursuit of the war on terror.

Summary: Five years after the tragic attacks on New York and Washington of September 11, 2001, it is time to evaluate American progress in the struggle against terrorism. This assessment, which focuses primarily on the international dimensions of American actions, suggests that American goals for the global war on terrorism may be both too ambitious and too ambiguous. The aims of the United States also seem to be based on an inappropriate characterisation of the adversary and the nature of the struggle. Some objectives are also internally inconsistent, in the sense of being incompatible with each other. Furthermore, the means assigned to the pursuit of the war on terrorism may not be suited either to the ends or to each other. Some modes of action may not be feasible, even in the light of vast American economic and military power. In addition, in official statements of strategy, the American government has shown an inability or unwillingness to recognise problems in the conceptualisation of the strategy and in its implementation. It is essential to take into account contradictions in practice if progress between 2001 and 2006 is to be properly assessed.

Analysis: Before offering an assessment, we should ask what, in principle, a strategy for combating terrorism should do. First, the government needs a clear and definitive political objective. Strategy is then a scheme for making the means produce the desired ends. The goals of the strategy cannot be so vague and open-ended that actions cannot be specified that would fulfil them. Moreover, the costs must be acceptable compared to the expected benefits (and both must be anticipated in advance). The means must thus be feasible as well as adapted to the ends. Strategy must also be adjusted to changing circumstances, which include its own effects and the reactions of both friends and enemies. The risks of different courses of action must be re-evaluated as circumstances are altered. The course of action may have to be changed accordingly.

Counterterrorist strategy must also fit into an overall foreign policy framework that integrates different objectives in light of the national interest. Competing values must be reconciled, such as the balance between combating terrorism and dealing with potential great power competition or restricting nuclear proliferation. Policy must also look to the future rather than concentrate on the short term. It is critically important that national

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policy be the result of a political process and that it represent, if not consensus, then open and substantive public debate over both ends and means. This debate must be informed by objective analysis of the costs and benefits of alternative strategies.

**American Counterterrorist Strategy**

The American response to terrorism as it stands today was forged in the acute shock of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, which constituted a rupture in American foreign policy. The official position of the United States was set by framing the threat as a war against ‘terrorism of global reach’. The implications of defining the task ahead as a ‘war’ were clear: the United States could not lose. The enemy had to be destroyed or defeated entirely. For the first time terrorism became the major threat to national security. The solution involved the use of military force. Victory had to be the outcome. Thus the ‘war’ metaphor was diagnostic and prescriptive, as well as consistent with traditional American political discourse. In the past, the United States had declared war on social problems such as poverty and drugs.

Four official documents subsequently defined and explained the American response:

2. February 2003, National Strategy for Combating Terrorism

The contents of these documents represented major departures in American policy. Before 9/11 it was inconceivable that the United States would make terrorism the single priority of strategy statements. The impact of these documents must also be seen in the light of the major organisational changes behind American policy: the establishment of a Department of Homeland Security, a Director of National Intelligence and a National Counterterrorist Center. The United States had not undertaken such fundamental bureaucratic reorganisation since the aftermath of World War II, when the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency were created.

**The Goals of American Strategy**

In the statements of 2002 and 2003, the goal of the United States was described as ‘a world in which terrorism does not define the daily lives of Americans and their friends’. The purpose of the American response was to eliminate terrorism as a threat to the American way of life (not to American power). The national interest was defined as opposing terrorism and preventing irresponsible states from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This dual interest was seen not just as a matter of national survival and self-protection, but as a moral necessity in dealing with evil. The prescribed ends were thus somewhat subjective: how would one ascertain whether or not terrorism defined the daily lives of Americans and their friends? Even the terrible attacks of 9/11 did not threaten the American way of life in a profound sense. The economic impact of the attacks, for example, was over-estimated at the time. Terrorism did not then and does not now threaten the survival of the United States. It cannot weaken American military or economic power.

In 2006, the statements of strategy demonstrate a sharp departure (or an even sharper departure) from a realist view of international politics. Spreading effective democracy around the world is named as the goal of American actions, because the spread of...
democracy will ‘bring an end to the scourge of terrorism’. The stated intent of the United States is now to defeat violent extremism of all sorts, not just Islamist and jihadist. The aim is to create an international environment that will be inhospitable to extremism. Thus advancing democracy (‘bringing hope and freedom to the people of the world’) is considered both an end and a means. The President’s letter accompanying the March 2006 National Security Strategy contends that the strategy is idealistic about goals and realistic about means. The ultimate goal of American policy is to end tyranny in the world.

These are sweeping aims, the accomplishment of which would involve a global transformation. Achieving them would drastically alter the internal characteristics of regimes, not relationships among states and balances of power. The resulting ‘democratic peace’ would presumably be internal as well as external. Democratic states would not go to war against each other, and their domestic political situations would be equally peaceful and stable. This is a classic ‘second image’ view in the terms of Kenneth Waltz’s seminal treatment, *Man, the State, and War.* It assumes that ‘good’ states will not go to war against each other. Waltz criticised this explanation of the causes of war because it neglected the ‘third image’, the structure of the international system, which he defined as relationships among sovereign states under conditions of anarchy, where the use of force is always the ultimate arbiter of disputes. In the lens of the ‘third image’, war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it. The ‘second image’ also overlooked the possibility that people would not agree on what a ‘good’ state was (thus Islamists think that the only good state is the Islamic state that is ruled by sharia law). Waltz did not consider the impact of civil violence, but processes of democratisation are often violent. Moreover, democratic procedures such as elections do not always result in peace-loving governments, as the recent Palestinian elections have shown. American strategy does not offer a policy recommendation with regard to democratically elected parties that espouse and employ violence.

All the strategy statements from 2002 to the present are consistent in agreeing that the struggle against terrorism is a war. In 2006, however, there is increased emphasis on a comparison between the war on terrorism and the Cold War, a theme that is stressed in official speeches as well. The war on terrorism is described as a ‘generational struggle’, with victory far in the future. The adversary is equated with the historical precedents of fascism and totalitarianism. Thus the enemy is an ideology, not a method of violence or a specific political actor. The enemy is defined as a murderous movement united by an ideology of oppression, violence and hate, which wishes to establish totalitarian rule over a world empire. This enemy threatens ‘global peace, international security and prosperity, the rising tide of democracy, and the right of all people to live without fear of indiscriminate violence’. The enemy is thus not yet a state but an empire in the making.

The 2006 strategy statements acknowledge the post 9/11 phenomenon of ‘home-grown’ or self-generated terrorism, presumably such as that resulting in the deadly 2004 and 2005 attacks in Bali, Madrid and London. Such decentralised terrorism occurs in democracies and is difficult to connect in operational terms to the leadership of al-Qaeda or other organised global movements with imperial ambitions. This form of terrorism is blamed obscurely on ‘some ethnic or religious groups... unable or unwilling to grasp the benefits of freedom’. Such groups, therefore, might pose a threat to national or transnational public safety even in a future world of effective democracies. This contradiction is not explained further.

*The Means of Pursuing the War on Terrorism*

The 2002 and 2003 statements stressed pre-emption as ‘anticipatory self-defence’. They bluntly advocated unilateralism. The strategy statement warned that the United States
would seek international support but would act alone if American interests and 'unique' responsibilities required. The strategy thus justified in advance the invasion of Iraq. It laid the grounds for the claim that is still sustained today, that the war in Iraq is an integral part of the global war on terrorism.

This unilateralist approach was renewed in 2006, but it was softened. The revised strategic statements do not dwell on going alone but refer to 'international standards' and strengthening coalitions and partnerships. For example, the March 2006 strategy contains an entire chapter devoted to the subject of strengthening alliances and preventing attacks not just against the United States but against American 'friends'. It affirms that the United States will take the fight to the enemy, but adds the qualification that the fight will be conducted with the support of friends and allies. There is mention of 'prevention' in the context of dealing with terrorist networks, not overthrowing regimes.

However, the 2006 policy refers frequently and urgently to the problem of states that support terrorism, singling out Iran and Syria. One of the strategies prominently outlined in the 2006 documents is deterrence of the use of WMD by making it clear that the users of such methods or those who help them will face an 'overwhelming response'. The statements promise that the United States will ensure that both its determination and its capacity to identify the source of an attack are well-known. The American conception of the threat, then, is that it does not stem exclusively from non-state actors aiming at a totalitarian empire or from the ideology they espouse. The real threat of catastrophic terrorism comes ultimately from states.

All the statements of strategy from 2002 to 2006 call for reliance on both military force (in the short term) and diplomacy or ‘winning the battle of ideas’ (in the long term). However, the 2006 revision stresses that ‘advancing democracy’ is the long-term solution, whereas all other actions are short term. Exactly how democracy is to be promoted is thus a key question.

In 2002-2003, the short-term actions required by national strategy were summarised alliteratively as the four ‘D’s’:

- Defeat terrorists (including cutting off their finances).
- Deny them state support.
- Diminish their strength by addressing ‘root causes’.
- Defend the homeland and interests abroad.

In 2006, advancing democracy (absent in the earlier statements) comes first. Next is the prevention of terrorist attacks before they occur. Then three ‘D’s’ follow, including defeat, deny and defend, as listed in 2002, but omitting the requirement of ‘diminish’ by addressing ‘root causes’ (this omission is not explained). The statement claims that democracy can provide a counter to the causes of terrorism: political alienation, grievances that can be blamed on others, subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation, and an ideology that justifies murder. The report dismisses other suggested causes such as poverty, hostility to US policy in Iraq, Israel-Palestine issues and American efforts to prevent terrorism. The American view is that ‘terrorists are emboldened more by perceptions of weakness than by demonstrations of resolve’. The United States must demonstrate that it is not decadent or easily intimidated. Reputation and credibility thus become important.

In 2006, there is a strong emphasis on denying access to WMD, the support and sanctuary of states, and control of a state from which terrorists could launch attacks on the US. This last set of denials is clearly a reference to the need to win the wars in Iraq.
and Afghanistan. It also reinforces the direction of American strategy to a more state-centric focus, as does the stress on deterring Iran and Syria.

Questions of Feasibility and Consistency

Numerous questions can be raised about the official strategies. They do not appear to recognise that the use of military force makes it hard to win a ‘battle’ of ideas, which involves persuasion rather than coercion and destruction. Efforts at public diplomacy have faltered in the face of the discomfort and hostility generated by the war in Iraq. The usefulness of military force in establishing democracy is questionable, the historical precedents of Germany and Japan not withstanding. These historical analogies are probably inappropriate, but they are evoked by comparing jihadism to totalitarianism. The war in Iraq (undertaken initially in the interest of pre-empting a WMD attack, then rephrased as intended to spread democracy and transform the politics of the Middle East) works against the goal of making the global environment inhospitable to terrorism and defeating violent extremism. The war in Iraq has encouraged radicalisation among susceptible minorities in the Muslim world, including within diaspora communities in the West. It has alienated many of the allies who should be partners in the war on terrorism. Among major powers, only Britain has remained an American ally, and public opinion has not followed the government’s lead. Jihadist movements use the war, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Lebanese conflicts, to justify terrorism against Western civilians in the name of defending Islam against ‘Jews and Crusaders’. The 2006 strategy statement acknowledges only that ‘The ongoing fight in Iraq has been twisted by terrorist propaganda as a rallying cry’.

Furthermore, many of the means that the United States has used at home and abroad are not intrinsically democratic and are objected to around the world on grounds of international law, civil liberties and human rights. Many friends have criticised the United States for its defiance of the Geneva Conventions in terms of the use of torture or inhumane treatment. The Administration has also faced challenges at home from prominent politicians such as Senator John McCain and former officials such as Colin Powell. The concept of ‘unlawful combatants’ is not widely accepted. The practice of rendition is disputed.

There are still other questions to be raised about the strategy. In general, how does a government defeat a method of violence or an ideology? In the long run, it may not be possible for the United States to promote democracy without ‘destabilising friendly regimes’ (in assessing progress in the war on terrorism, American policy statements refer to the success of bringing countries that were part of the problem before 9/11 into being part of the solution without destabilising friends in key regions, which indicates that avoiding destabilisation of allied regimes helpful in the war on terrorism is an important policy goal). The 2006 strategy notes that regimes that are allies of terror will be held to account not just by the United States but by the world, but how is this holding to account to be accomplished? The record of the international community in dealing with Iran, for example, is not encouraging. The United States and its allies have disagreed when it comes to containing Iran’s developing nuclear programme. And on a practical point, how can the United States deny the Internet to terrorists as a virtual haven, which is one of the stated aims in 2006? The fact that the Internet is an important resource for organising terrorism is not in dispute, but controlling access to information is a daunting task.

Assessing Progress

A key fact is that the United States has not suffered another attack on American territory. There has been no repetition of 9/11. However, some of America’s allies have experienced terrible attacks, which may represent a deflection of terrorism to softer targets. This pattern may also reflect the changing character of the threat, as the Jihadist movement becomes more diffused, globalised and home-grown. Small groups thus take advantage of local opportunity. Furthermore, whereas the al-Qaeda organisation
established in Pakistan in 1988, which funded and directed the 9/11 attack, no longer exists, its top leaders remain free. They continue to taunt the United States and mobilise followers and imitators. They are still able to communicate and to inspire others. In addition, if Iraq and Afghanistan are considered outposts in the war on terrorism, they are suffering immensely high levels of terrorism, especially Iraq. Suicide bombings have reached an unprecedented number in Iraq and spread from there to Afghanistan.

According to a survey by Foreign Policy and the Center for American Progress in the summer of 2006, most of the experts who were surveyed do not think that the United States is winning the war on terrorism. Almost 80% of the over 100 experts who were questioned had worked in the American government. A bipartisan majority (84%) thought that the United States was not winning. Asked if they thought the world had become safer or more dangerous for the United States and the American people, 86% thought that the world was much or somewhat more dangerous. The respondents were critical of all areas of performance and of all bureaucracies involved. Public opinion polls by The New York Times and CBS News in August showed that a bare majority of 55% of those surveyed approved of the President’s handling of the campaign against terrorism (this figure was up slightly from the previous week). Also, 51% of the sample thought that the war in Iraq was separate from the war on terrorism, an increase of 10 percentage points since June, despite the Administration’s claims that Iraq is an integral part of the ‘GWOT’. Terrorism and the war in Iraq are about equally important to Americans, according to this poll.

Press coverage of the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was largely negative. For example, Frank Rich, writing in The New York Times, commented that the loss of unity within the United States and in the world is as much a cause for mourning as the attack itself. The Council on Foreign Relations update on ‘The Terror War and Remembrance’ reports on both optimistic and pessimistic assessments and concludes that although the question of ‘Is America winning or losing this fight?’ is on the minds of everyone, there is no simple answer.

My critical assessment of official strategy is not meant to imply that there have been no successes, including extensive international cooperation in law enforcement and intelligence areas, arrests of many if not all important al-Qaeda leaders, disruption of numerous plots and efforts by the United Nations and other international bodies to promote norms that delegitimise terrorism. However, official American statements do not recognise that many of the means by which the ‘GWOT’ has been implemented have jeopardised the legitimacy of American leadership and made American hegemony seem less than benign. American power has become suspect.

There are further problems and contradictions. The 2006 strategy asserts that terrorism ‘is not simply a result of’ the Israel-Palestine conflict, but it fails to acknowledge the political implications of the conflict. It does not discuss the difficult issue of Hezbollah and Lebanon at all. The 2006 strategy claims that Afghanistan now has a democratic government and that it is a full partner in the ‘War on Terror’. It also announces that Iraq has joined the coalition against terrorism. It consistently refers to a struggle against ‘terrorists’ in Iraq without mentioning the sectarian dimensions of violence, full-fledged insurgency or the prospect of civil war. The statement asserts that ‘A multinational coalition joined by the Iraqis is aggressively prosecuting the war against the terrorists in Iraq’. The war in Iraq,

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7 ‘The Terrorism Index’, Foreign Policy, July-August 2006, p. 49-55.
10 Accessed at http://www.cfr.org/publication/11399/winning_or_losing.html. The report has hypertext links to different viewpoints in the media and among government officials.
designed to defeat terrorism, has not only resulted in extensive terrorism and sectarian violence in Iraq, including attracting a branch of al-Qaeda, but has also created opportunities for Iran.

The 2006 strategy documents mention that Libya was removed from the official list of state sponsors of terrorism in June 2006 because it has renounced terrorism. In fact, the strategy states that Libya is a model for ‘rogue’ states who wish to rejoin the community of nations. Libya has been rehabilitated in American eyes. However, the strategy statement makes no reference to the fact that Libya is not a democracy and is not even ‘transitioning’ towards democracy, as Iraq is claimed to be.

Similarly, there is no discussion of the serious problems posed by non-democratic allies such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. There is no explanation of how ‘hope and freedom’ might be brought to these countries, which are ruled by authoritarian regimes. Nor is there mention of Saudi support for intolerant versions of Islam. Since all of these countries have been linked to the emergence of al-Qaeda, they might be the appropriate place to start with a policy of world-wide democratisation.

**Conclusion:** The ambitiousness of American goals is not matched by the feasibility of the means. It may not be possible to have idealistic goals and realist means, as President Bush has recommended. The objective of spreading effective democracy and ending tyranny in the world is beyond America’s grasp. It is not possible to defeat violent extremism of all varieties, even if democracy were to take hold. Military force cannot defeat small but deadly groups that are largely autonomous of a centralised command and independent of state support. With regard to combating terrorism, American policy makers may be suffering from the same kind of overly optimistic assumptions that led them to believe that the United States would be greeted as a liberator in Iraq and that there was no need to plan for post-war security. Confidence in the justness of the war on terrorism and the prospect of ultimate victory may lead American decision makers to ignore contradictions and fallacies that undermine their strategy.

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