
Chapter 7

**Strategies for Combating
Terrorism**

Kent Hughes Butts

Chapter 7 Strategies for Combating Terrorism

Kent Hughes Butts

In order to defeat terrorism, the United States (U. S.) must have an accepted, combating terrorism strategy upon which each agency and element of U.S. national power can base its own combating terror plans and objectives. This strategy should reflect the three pillars of the president’s National Security Strategy (NSS)—defense, diplomacy, and development—and support its vision. In the absence of a unifying combating terrorism strategy, the United States will undertake ad hoc efforts characterized by unsynchronized and variably efficient agency plans. This chapter identifies the elements desired in a complete strategy and discusses the importance of strategic planning to accomplish U.S. government objectives for combating terrorism. It reviews the elements of the two extent competing strategies for combating terrorism and identifies themes that should be reflected in any final U.S. combating terrorism strategy.

The Elements of Strategy

If one reads many of the “strategies” developed by agencies of the U. S. government, one will find that they frequently are characterized by a lack of clarity concerning essential elements that most strategists would expect to find in a strategy. Conversely, in reading strategy documents from the private sector or those written by the military, one tends to find a consistency of framework that enables the reader to ascertain quickly the purpose, the plans for achieving that purpose, and those responsible for using the available resources to achieve success. These strategy documents will uniformly include the three essential elements of any strategy: the end state to be achieved; the ways or concepts to achieve that end state, and the resources available to implement those concepts. Known commonly as *ends, ways, and means*, they are the three pillars upon which, when properly aligned, rests the crown of victory.

The importance of strategy-based planning is exemplified by the highly effective presidential election strategies developed by the two major political parties. No political party campaign manager could hope to be successful without sending the chosen candidate into the fray with a clear and easily articulated vision. The end state of victory and the successful election to office of the chosen candidate is understood by all members of the campaign planning staff. So too, strategic themes and concepts of the campaign will be known to all supporters so that their daily actions may help achieve interim objectives and ensure unity of effort and a common focus. And of course, the clear end state and well defined strategic concepts will make it easy to identify the resources necessary to achieve victory, and thus, facilitate the effort to obtain those essential resources from stakeholders or donors. If the Republican and Democratic political party campaigns benefit from this quality strategic planning, so too should the efforts of the United States to combat what the President states is the primary threat to U.S. national security—terrorism.

The United States has a National Security Strategy that enhances its ability to function successfully in the dynamic global milieu. The strategy defines national interests, the objectives necessary to achieve those interests, and the means or resources with which they are to be pursued. This was not always the case. In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols, Department of Defense Reorganization Act amended the National Security Act of 1947 to require this strategy. Goldwater-Nichols requires the President to send to Congress a comprehensive annual report that defines the U. S. National Security Strategy, and the global interests, goals and objectives vital to U.S. security.¹

The NSS outlines U.S. foreign policy, global commitments, and the defense capabilities necessary to implement the strategy. The NSS specifies the proposed short and long term uses of the various elements of national power necessary to protect, or further, U.S. interests and achieve stated objectives. The NSS also emphasizes the need to use diplomacy, development and defense in concert to achieve the stated security objectives and address the threat to those objectives posed by terrorism. The NSS document is

¹ Department of Defense Reorganization Act, 1986.

intended to be a clear articulation of the elements necessary to ensure the survival of vital U.S. interests, and a strategic vision that allows other nations to understand U.S. priorities. The NSS is written for a state-centric world of weak international organizations with questionable enforcement mechanisms, and multiple dynamic threats, with terrorism the chief among them. Thus, the NSS is a pragmatic document that articulates current and long-term U.S. national security interests and methods for protecting them.² Strategies to address combating terrorism should be rooted in the language and intent of the National Security Strategy.

Competing Strategies for Combat Terrorism

The terrorist threat has changed markedly since the end of the Cold War. State sponsorship from the Soviet Union and others characterized much of that era's terrorist threat. Terrorist organizations were largely secular or nationalist in nature.³ The end of the Cold War robbed many of the organizations of sponsorship and purpose, but also allowed long suppressed ethnic, socioeconomic and religious differences to surface. Radical ideologies have evolved that exploit these differences and use the new global systems of communication to broaden their reach and resource base. Adherents to these ideologies may be multi-national and cooperate with criminal groups and other, regional, terrorist groups. Fortunately, the elements essential to combat this new source of terrorism and create the single, clear, concise, unifying strategic framework to do so, can be found within the two existing CT strategies. The two documents' origins differ, as do their effect upon the U.S. national security leadership and the direction of the CT effort. They should be used to create a new combating terrorism strategy that will guide the application of U.S. resources and foreign policy.

The *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (NSCT) was written by a team led by the National Security Council (NSC) in consultation with

² David Jablonski, *Times Cycle and National Military Strategy: The Case for Continuity in a Time of Change*, Strategic Studies Institute, U. S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1995

³ *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (NSCT), Feb. 2003, 7

the interagency community. Published in February 2003, it elaborates and complements the themes of the President's 2002 National Security Strategy. The vision that defines the end state of the NSCT is clear and compelling: a world in which "Americans and other civilized people...can lead their lives free of fear from terrorist attacks."⁴ The NSCT identifies the growing list of resources or means with which the strategy will be executed: "every instrument of national power—diplomatic, economic, law enforcement, financial, information, intelligence and military."⁵ Its strategic concepts or ways of achieving that end state are well reasoned and thorough, and underpin the alternative strategy written by the Defense Department.

In order to create a world free of terrorism, the NSCT identified four concepts that were to be synchronized and pursued simultaneously. The first is to *defeat* terrorist organizations with global reach. This entails targeting elements of leadership, financing, sanctuary, and command and control. The second concept is to *deny* terrorist groups sponsorship, support and sanctuary. This means encouraging other states to meet the terrorist threat, either by building their capacity or their will. These two have dominated the U. S. effort to combat terrorism. The third tenet is to *diminish* the underlying conditions exploited by terrorists. This tenet commits the United States to winning the war of ideas by promoting state and regional stability through political, social and economic development. The final concept is to *defend* the interests, citizens and territory of United States both domestically and in the international milieu.⁶

While the elements of this strategy were clear and the mission defined, the effort to enact the strategy was slow to evolve. This stemmed from the failure of the NSC to serve as a strong coordinator of the CT effort, the almost exclusive focus of the administration on the defeat and deny concepts, and the weakness of the strategy in identifying the agencies responsible for leading and synchronizing each of the four concepts. These weaknesses kept the NSCT from effectively altering the unbalanced U.S. approach to

⁴ Ibid., 1

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 11-12

combating terrorism and applying all effective resources toward defeating the threat. Although some agencies beyond DoD, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of the Treasury aggressively acted upon elements of the NSCT that were within their purview, the administration came under criticism in the late part of 2003 amid allegations that the United States was losing the war on terrorism. Responding to this criticism, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld ordered a review of the U.S. approach to combating terrorism. As a result of this review, he ordered the Joint Staff to develop a National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism (NMSP-WOT). When Secretary Rumsfeld was satisfied with the NMSP-WOT, it was briefed to President Bush. The President approved the strategy and it was signed in 2005 by Secretary Rumsfeld.

Far from being simply a strategic plan for the military element of power, the NMSP-WOT addresses the full spectrum of CT concepts and is now recognized as the leading CT strategy. It is based upon the NSCT and combines most of its concepts into a new framework that has three ways: protect the homeland; disrupt and attack terrorist networks; and counter ideological support for terrorism. The end state that it seeks is to achieve is a global environment inhospitable to terrorists in which terrorist extremists do not threaten free and open societies.⁷ It identifies as its resources the same instruments of national power as the NSCT.

The NMSP-WOT was launched at the beginning of the second G. W. Bush administration and captures fresh thinking about the need for a more balanced approach to combating terrorism. This includes seeking to create an international partnership aimed at denying terrorist organizations the networks and resources they need to function and survive and diminishing the underlying conditions. It also comes at a time when the NSC has been reorganized and Ambassador John Negroponte takes over as the Director of National Intelligence and with the more sizable National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) available to draft strategic plans and hold the interagency

⁷ National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism (NMSP-WOT), unclassified briefing, J-5 Joint Staff, April 18, 2005.

community accountable. It thus captures the momentum of a new administration effort to build partnerships rather than approaching foreign affairs in a seemingly unilateral fashion. It also sets the stage for a genuine and long needed CT strategic communication program by dropping such harsh and easily misrepresented language as, “Where states are unwilling, we will act decisively to counter the threat they pose and, ultimately to compel them to cease supporting terrorism.” found in the NSCT.⁸ The desire to create CT partnerships is genuine and interagency wide, and is reflected in the NMSP-WOT terminology. The center of gravity for this strategy is its focus on extremist ideology, an effort embraced by such administration leaders as Donald Rumsfeld and Steven Hadley. This allows the United States to move away from couching the threat as exclusively Islamic and leaving the United States vulnerable to terrorist strategic communication that has portrayed the war on terror as a Western war on Islam.

In the spring 2005 Principals’ Meetings, in which a review of the U.S. approach to combating terrorism was undertaken, Secretary Rice presented a slightly modified version of the NMSP-WOT as the accepted framework for discussions. Subsequent to these discussions however, elements of this strategy were made public by senior administration officials, who addressed the downside of using the term war on terror and surfaced some of the concepts articulated in the NMSP-WOT. Some conservatives immediately portrayed this suggested revision of terminology as being soft on terror⁹ and the president quickly responded to this domestic criticism by backing away from the new approach and renewing his use of the term “war on terror.” Some argue that this calls into question the future direction of the U.S. combating terrorism program and the tenets of any proposed plans for implementing the CT strategy. However, it could be argued that, given the fact that the president had approved this strategic plan, it may be simply that some elements will need to be reworded before the NMSP-WOT will be adopted and put into practice. At this point then, the U.S. has a lame duck National Strategy for Combating Terrorism that has been replaced within the

⁸ NSCT, 12

⁹ William Kristol, “Bush v. Rumsfeld,” *The Weekly Standard*, August 15, 2005.

interagency community by a new strategic concept that is itself in question. Nevertheless, the strategies provide a clear vision; similar, well-conceived strategic concepts; and encourage a broad array of U. S. elements of power to be synchronized and committed against the threat of terrorism. Almost certainly, the policy that emerges from the ongoing CT review process will be framed by these strategies and a modified NMS-P-WOT will emerge as the new U. S. CT strategy.

Strategic Direction¹⁰

The ongoing CT review process has demonstrated that the interagency community now agrees that the U.S. approach to combating terrorism requires a strategy. A strategy and the strategic planning process that implements its concepts provides three important functions: they chart a path through uncertainty; they relate the various agencies to the changing milieu; and they allow unity of effort by enabling lower echelons to alter their behavior to be in consonance with a clearly understood direction. Moreover, the strategy would: focus the government on a long range vision, helping senior leaders avoid the “tyranny of today’s crisis”; define the strategic concepts necessary to achieve that vision; and specify clearly the required resources and leadership. Signed and prioritized by the president, the strategy would define his expectations of how resources will be used by matching actions to achieve the end state. Such a strategy organizes the interagency toward collective objectives, aligns priorities through risk assessment, and defines roles and participants. It also serves to frame public discussions, which maintain the will of the people over the long haul, and advance U.S. strategic communication themes. Finally, the strategy would guide the U.S. government’s relationships with partner nations for managing transnational threats, and put combating terrorism in perspective within broader national security priorities.

¹⁰ Many of the following recommendations were developed during a workshop at the U. S. Army War College Symposium, Addressing the Underlying Conditions that Foster Terrorism, which took place at the U. S. Army War College’s Center for Strategic Leadership from 8 – 10 June 2005.

Implementing plans for the U.S. strategy that ultimately emerge from the ongoing review process and media driven debate should do two things. They should undermine the inclination by non-state actors to use violence for political objectives against non-combatants, and should foster tolerant civil societies that protect fundamental human rights¹¹. While the national strategy should remain concerned about how the United States government would defeat the immediate threat of terrorism to U.S. citizens and interests, its necessary implementing international components should be concerned with building coalitions and leveraging the comparative advantage of both partner countries and the private sector. Tapping into these strengths, the strategy's implementing plans should first undermine and then prevent terrorism by encouraging and sustaining long term commitments to developing civil societies, and increasing opportunities in those societies. Similarly, the strategy should foster an understanding of the cultures from which it seeks support.

Although the Department of Defense drafted National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism is a good beginning to a broader approach to implementing the current National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, it is not sufficient unto itself. Together the NSCT and the NMSP-WOT include many of the elements necessary for a balanced strategy to defeat terrorism. However, if the overall strategy is to be effective in addressing the United States' primary national security threat, creation of a full set of appropriate interagency implementing plans for the NSCT will have to have presidential priority and emphasis—no strategy will work unless the leader both grants authority and holds all involved principals accountable for its execution. Regardless of which agency is the “lead” agency, all agencies will need to develop their own supportive plans – fully aligned and coordinated not only with the overall strategy itself and with the lead agency's plan, but also with every other agencies' plan. Clearly all the agencies' plans need to also de-legitimize anti-American perceptions that feed terrorism, omitting inappropriate anti-Islamic rhetoric and instead treating terrorism as a transnational threat that all nations have in common. Both the NSCT as a

¹¹ International Law already prohibits states and their military forces from deliberately employing violence against non-combatants.

whole, and the implementing plan set must be complemented by a strategic communication program supported by all cabinet members that projects a unifying message to the American public while it simultaneously promotes greater tolerance and cultural respect both at home and abroad. Similarly, as already noted above, the required set of agency implementing plans must reflect an understanding of the regional cultural differences and interests of partner nations; and the strategic communications effort must demonstrate that understanding. Finally, the various implementing plans must be carefully coordinated and integrated so as to affordably include resources to promote and sustain long-term commitments to develop good governance and civil societies, including education and economic opportunities in developing societies.

Summary

The threat of terrorism is not waning. One could argue that the readily identified targets have been addressed by the *defeat* function, driving terrorist organizations into more isolated and difficult to identify cells. Thus, the next phase of combating terrorism will be more complex, requiring a long term effort that not only attacks and disrupts and protects the homeland, but counters the ideological support for terrorism by addressing the underlying conditions that terrorists exploit and helping partner nations win the hearts and minds of high risk populations. A fully coordinated, integrated set of interagency implementing plans for the combating terrorism strategy is essential to that mission. Effective strategy does not require each element to do the same things toward accomplishing the goals, but it does call for each element to do its things in a manner or at a time that assists the actions of the others rather than confounds them. DoD may have taken the first step by developing the NMSP-WOT, but unless the other agencies and involved parties put forth equal analytical and planning efforts—and unless everyone truly coordinates and integrates those efforts among all the agencies—neither the NSCT nor DoD’s NMSP-WOT will significantly enhance the nation’s security against terrorist activities.

Dr. Kent Butts is Director, National Security Issues Branch, Center for Strategic Leadership, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.