Thoughts on Unconventional Threats and Terrorism

by Karl W. Eikenberry

Effective formulation of a state's security strategy begins with an articulation of national interests and the threats to those interests. During the past twenty-five years, as the dangers posed by potential nation-state actors have shrunk significantly from those experienced throughout most of the twentieth century, America's national security strategy has given great prominence to unconventional threats in general and to international terrorism in particular. Indeed, since 9/11, terrorism is regarded by the US national security community as the most severe of the many existing unconventional threats. But is the absolute priority currently placed on combating terrorism strategically justified? This paper explores this issue, first by examining the meaning of the term *unconventional threat* and then by examining the implications of using unconventional threats in developing America's security policy.

Unconventional is typically defined as" being out of the ordinary" or "not bound by or in accordance with convention."[1] For something to be classified unconventional implies its occurrence is infrequent or not widespread and that it is in contravention to dominant societal rules and norms. Unconventional, however, can become conventional when framework conditions change. For example, some in the United States categorized unrestricted submarine warfare as acts of terror in the buildup to and during the First World War. It was defined in this manner both because only the Germans employed U-boats on a large scale and because the Germans used this force asymmetrically against American shipping and that of our wartime allies, neither of whom had greatly invested in that capability or in any appropriate countermeasures. But by the Second World War, the use of submarines was widespread among most of the major maritime combatants and the extensive

application of undersea warfare against merchant vessels had transitioned to the conventional domain.

Threat refers to "someone or something that could cause trouble or harm" or to "the possibility that something bad or harmful could happen."[2] Threats are measured according to the capability to impose damage together with the intention to (or the probability of a) strike. An actor might possess significant potential to harm a state, but if there is no incentive to do so, it does not pose a threat to that state (e.g., the United Kingdom and the United States). Alternatively, an actor might have a strong desire to attack a state but only have a weak capacity to inflict high costs, in which case it might be considered a weak threat (perhaps Al Qaeda and the United States in 2014).

Since the end of the Cold War, the term *unconventional threat* has become more prominent among American civilian strategists, the intelligence community, and the armed forces. Moreover, the types of unconventional threats have also proliferated.

For example, in 1997, then lieutenant general Patrick Hughes, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, in testimony before the United States Congress described a "number of transnational threats–terrorism, WMD and missile proliferation, drug trafficking–[that] continue to plague the international environment and threaten U.S. citizens, forces, property, and interests." He also drew attention to "the changing nature of future warfare– the application of new technologies and innovative doctrinal concepts to 'conventional' military operations, and the development of new forms of asymmetric warfare."[3]

By 2009, Paul Stockton, the assistant secretary of defense for Homeland Defense and Americas' Security Affairs–CBRNE (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and High-Yield Explosives) in testimony to the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities cited President Obama's call to "overcome the full spectrum of threats–the conventional and the unconventional; the nation-state and the terrorist network; the spread of deadly technologies and the spread of hateful ideologies; 18th-century-style piracy and 21st-century cyber threats."[4] Robert Gates, the secretary of defense during that same year, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "one of the greatest dangers we continue to face is the toxic mix of rogue nations, terrorist groups, and nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons."[5]

At US urging, NATO has also placed more emphasis on unconventional threats. In 2010, the alliance created within its International Staff a new Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD) aimed at dealing with what it declared "a growing range

of non-traditional risks and challenges such as terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), cyber defense, and energy security."[6]

The United States Department of Defense *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* has expanded the categories of unconventional threats in the future security environment. These now include terrorist organizations, criminal (especially narco-trafficking) networks, piracy, WMD proliferation, and the possible use of lethal biological agents. In addition, the *QDR* identifies various "threat multipliers," such as the negative impact of climate change, the strains placed on resources and government control by urbanization, the spread of sophisticated technologies, and the vulnerability of the US military and economy to attacks in the domains of space and cyberspace.[7]

Thus, the term *unconventional threat* currently encompasses a plethora of issues that could potentially be elevated to the level of having urgent national or even international security implications. The strategic utility of today's loose and liberal definition of unconventional threats, however, especially when applied to terrorism, suffers in three critical ways.

First, agents and the ways and means available to those agents are often casually lumped together, which confuses efforts to identify the real foe. As has been pointed out often since 9/11, terror is a tactic. War can be declared on and waged against Al Qaeda, but it is not clear how one can usefully wage war against its actions. American political leaders have periodically invoked the metaphor of war to galvanize support for policies aiming to combat social ills (such as "the war on poverty" or "the war on drugs"). It is dangerous, however, to employ such sweeping metaphors when fighting an actual war, as with the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

Real wars must have real enemies and attainable political-military objectives. To declare that America is engaged in a war to the finish against all global acts of terrorism is empty rhetoric with negative consequences. Like the wars on poverty and drugs, unless the nation is prepared to stay mobilized for centuries, failure is guaranteed.

Moreover, by ignoring agency and instead singularly focusing on operational methods, strategy is given short shrift. The starting point for a sound national strategy is the association of threats with actors, not actions. The United States should condemn any act of terrorism in the world as criminal, but this does not mean that Washington should wage war against any and all parties who engage in terrorist acts.

During the Cold War, America found it useful to support Afghan freedom fighters who occasionally employed terrorist tactics against Soviet occupation forces (both

civilian and military). Because the mujahideen were useful proxies at the time and because they inflicted damage on America's mortal enemy, their various transgressions were excused. Even today, if the Free Syrian Army managed to blow up Bashar al Assad's home and kill his immediate family, the United States would likely rejoice privately or at least remain silent. By contrast, if ISIS executed the family of an Iraqi provincial police chief, Washington would condemn such an act as barbarous. Again, all acts of terror are criminal, but they do not all equally impact or diminish America's security.

Second, the adjective *unconventional* is helpful in some instances in the normative sense but may be unhelpful when implying out of the ordinary. It is hard to imagine a world, for example, in which acts of terrorism against civilian populations were deemed conventional. Still, given a world in which terrorist tactics are commonly employed, an effort to make the out of the ordinary disappear entirely would require staggering levels of investments in military, law enforcement, security, and intelligence organizations–expenditures that would go well beyond the huge amounts already being spent.

US political leaders can comfortably discuss with constituents the risk calculus associated with significant nation-state actors (Russia, China, Iran, etc.) but have difficulty candidly addressing the cost-benefit trade-offs involved in bulletproofing the country against any and all non-state unconventional threats, especially those that are homegrown. The American people still have a zero-tolerance mentality against foreign terrorist threats. Moreover, no aspiring politician can hope to be elected or maintain office on a platform arguing that long-term societal order and confidence are more threatened by the frequent Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School types of tragedies than by even small-scale attacks carried out in the homeland by international terrorist organizations occasionally but rarely.

Third, objectively defining the level of threat, rationally determining the impact of potential losses from unconventional attacks (especially from a non-state actor), and deciding on reasonable responses have proven problematic in the American political system. Although more Americans lost their lives from the Al Qaeda attacks on 9/11 than from the Japanese raid against Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor led to some 12,123,455 servicemen on active duty in 1945, with more than 407,316 killed in action during the course of the Second World War. By comparison, in 2008, during the peak of the Iraq Surge and with the War in Afghanistan intensifying, approximately 1,402,000 personnel were serving on active duty, with about 6,800 killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars combined by 2014.   (For comparative purposes, one should also remember that America's population today is about 2.3 times larger than it was in 1945.)[8]

It is hard to conceive of a convincing strategic response subsequent to the Day of Infamy short of an extended bloody Asia-Pacific campaign culminating with the

American military occupation of Japan. Yet, granting that the Afghanistan War was launched as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, better airport screening and the inexpensive securing of commercial airliner cockpit doors went a long way to improving America's security. If, however, the political culture leads the loyal opposition to condemn any breach of US security by unconventional attack (in this instance, by terrorism), then Pearl Harbor and 9/11 will be conflated, though strategists will be–and, indeed, have been–vexed when trying to find the Clausewitzian analog of the "advance to Tokyo" in response to an act of terrorism.

Contemporary American national security strategy tags international terrorism as the gravest unconventional threat to the United States. The *2012 Strategic Guidance* issued by then secretary of defense, Leon Panetta, notes:

> With the diffusion of destructive technology, these [violent] extremists have the potential to pose catastrophic threats that could directly affect our security and prosperity. For the foreseeable future, the United States will continue to take an active approach to countering these threats by monitoring the activities of non-state threats worldwide, working with allies and partners to establish control over ungoverned territories, and directly striking the most dangerous groups and individuals when necessary.[9]

Great emphasis on the threat posed by international terrorism and the need to effectively counter this threat are also evident in the *2014 QDR*. For several reasons, however, it is not clear the threat posed by international terrorism should be elevated to the summit by US strategists.

First, since 9/11, Al Qaeda and its affiliates have not been able to conduct any successful attacks inside the United States. Moreover, since the 2005 London 7/7 incident, no major successful attacks by Al Qaeda have taken place in Europe. Indeed, the most deadly terrorist attack in Europe subsequent to London's 7/7 was the 2011 bombing and shooting in Norway that resulted in seventy-seven killed. That slaughter, however, was conducted not by a foreign terrorist operative but by Norwegian citizen, Anders Behring Breivik, acting alone.[10] One might argue that the massive sustained investments in homeland defense and intelligence gathering and aggressive counterterrorist operations globally have kept America safe, with similar steps undertaken by European governments at least in the fields of homeland defense and law enforcement, thus reducing the terrorist threat within their countries. Still, as mentioned earlier, obvious and relatively cheap countermeasures such as better airport screening and secured commercial airliner cockpit doors have made a profound difference. That school shootings in the United States are not black swan events implies that the failure of international terrorist organizations to routinely launch headline-making assaults inside America's shopping malls probably indicates lack of capacity.

Second, even if international terrorists periodically manage to penetrate all barriers and carry out a small-to-medium-scale attack in the United States (that is, short of employing WMD or using techniques that would have crippling effects on part of or the entire country), would this justify equating the threat posed by Al Qaeda and its imitators to that of nuclear armed nation-state competitors who field militaries and design contingency campaigns not culminating with a car bomb explosion in Time Square but with the defeat of the US Armed Forces and the collapse of its government?

As mentioned earlier, capability and intention together define threat levels. Certain foreign terrorist organizations have a great desire to inflict pain on the United States, but, for now, they lack robust delivery capability and are armed only with low-caliber weapons. This, of course, could dramatically change if the barriers to acquiring nuclear explosives or lethal biological material should unexpectedly be lowered. But for now, while vigilance is still mandatory, shouldn't less costly security alternatives such as better preventive and counter-proliferation measures at least be given a higher budgetary priority?

Third, and last, international terrorist organizations—and certainly Islamic militant jihadist groups—are dynamic and politically opportunistic. Tactics designed and employed by the United States at any point in time to eradicate any one movement will likely yield disappointing strategic results. Islamic terrorist groups operate in a geopolitical context. The rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq was fueled by Sunni disaffection with their loss of status after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The growth of ISIS (or ISIL) has been facilitated by a Shiite-dominated Iraqi government' disenfranchisement of its Sunni minority population and furthered by the ongoing proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (aided by a supporting cast of other regional players). Recently, international security scholar and military historian Andrew Bacevich made the point that attacking terrorism without reference to geopolitical context is not a recipe for victory, stating,

> As America's efforts to "degrade and ultimately destroy" Islamic State militants extend into Syria, Iraq War III has seamlessly morphed into Greater Middle East Battlefield XIV. That is, Syria has become at least the 14th country in the Islamic world that U.S. forces have invaded or occupied or bombed, and in which American soldiers have killed or been killed. And that's just since 1980.[11]

As horrible as is the beheading of several American (and British) citizens at the hands of barbaric thugs, a more appropriate response might be launching a punitive raid and leaving behind a calling card, rather than embarking on a multiyear war of annihilation against a mutating organism that thrives on complex sectarian and ethnic rivalries in a distant land. The calling card approach would likely be

understood and grudgingly accepted by the peoples of that region. The war of annihilation is certain to excite greater enmity.

In sum, the goals and level of effort associated with America's counterterrorist operations and their overall place in the US national security strategy should be informed by (1) an objective determination of the threat posed by those groups' aspiring to attack the United States; (2) a consideration of the geopolitical context that such groups operate within; and (3) a recognition that nation-states, for now, are still the dominant players on the global strategic landscape. Finally, although recognizing the need to defuse the challenges posed by unconventional threats in the form of acts of terrorism, a good starting point could be creating effective countermeasures that can prevent or thwart potentially threatening actors and their endless array of unconventional, asymmetric actions before they are able to gain resources and traction.

Notes

1   Merriam-Webster definition of "unconventional," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unconventional.

2   Merriam-Webster definition of "threat," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threat

3   Prepared Statement of Lieutenant General Patrick M. Hughes, USA, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, One Hundred Fifth Congress First Session on Current and Projected Security Threats to the United States, February 5, 1997, pp. 12-14; 18. http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/pdfs105th/105201.pdf.

4   Statement by the Honorable Paul Stockton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and America's Security Affairs before the 111th Congress, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, United States House of Representatives, July 28, 2009, p. 46. http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-111hhrg58292/pdf/CHRG-111hhrg58292.pdf.

5   Submitted Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates on DOD Challenges to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., January 27, 2009. http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1337.

6   "New NATO Division to Deal with Emerging Security Challenges," August 5, 2010. http://www.act.nato.int/new-nato-division-to-deal-with-emerging-security-challenges.

7   U.S. Department of Defense, The Quadrennial Defense Review 2014 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2014), pp. 6-9., http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf.

8   World War II Active Duty troop figures from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstracts of the United States - 1950, Section 9: Military Services and Veterans Affairs, "Table 254: Military Personnel on Active Duty, 1921-1949," p. 211. Killed in Action figures for World War II from

http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/us-military.html. Iraq War 2008 figures from http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/12statab/defense.pdf, Section 10: National Security and Veterans Affairs, "Table 509: Military Personnel on Active Duty by Location, 1980-2010" and "Table 510: Department of Defense Personnel: 1960-2010," p.334 & 335. Both 1945 World War II and 2008 Iraq and Afghanistan War Active Duty troop figures include National Guard, Reserves, retired regular personnel on extended or continuous active duty, but excludes Coast Guard. The US Census Bureau estimates a U.S. population of about 139,928,000 in July 1945 (see http://www.census.gov/popest/data/national/totals/pre-1980/tables/popclockest.txt) and about 312 million in July 2011 (see http://www.census.gov/popest/data/historical/2010s/vintage_2011/index. html). For the number of servicemen killed in action in Afghanistan and Iraq as of April 2014 (the actual figure is 6,802), the data is provided by the Costs of War Project: http://www.costsofwar.org/sites/default/files/Direct%20 War%20Death%20Toll%20in%20Iraq,%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20since%202001%20to%20 April%202014%206%2026.pdf.

9   U.S. Department of Defense, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2012), p. 1. http://www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf.

10   The most deadly post-9/11 terrorist attack in Europe occurred on 11 March 2004 in the form of a series of train bombings in Madrid, Spain. The perpetrators were Islamic extremists linked to Al Qaeda. The explosions killed 191 people and wounded 1,841. A subsequent bombing was attempted, but thwarted, in April 2004. http://news.bbc. co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/guides/457000/457031/html/.

11   Andrew J. Bacevich, "Even If We Defeat the Islamic State, We'll Still Lose the Bigger War," Washington Post, October 3, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/even-if-we-defeat-the-islamic-state-well-still-lose-the-bigger-war/2014/10/03/e8c0585e-4353-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html.

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