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Terrorism and Counterterrorism in an Era of Great-Power Competition

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Hours after the last US military forces withdrew from Afghanistan on September 1, 2021, President Joe Biden reassured a conflict-weary public in an address from the White House, “My fellow Americans, the war in Afghanistan is now over.” Later in this same White House address, the president emphasized:

The world is changing. We’re engaged in a serious competition with China. We’re dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts with Russia. We’re confronted with cyberattacks and nuclear proliferation.

We have to shore up America’s competitive[ness] to meet these new challenges in the competition for the 21st century. And we can do both: fight terrorism and take on new threats that are here now and will continue to be here in the future.¹

But what will it require in terms of policies and resources to “do both”—compete effectively with strategic rivals like China and Russia while concurrently maintaining the vigilance and commitment required to defend the homeland against ever-present terrorist threats and prevent another catastrophic 9/11–magnitude attack or worse? America will rightfully continue to assume its global leadership role in meeting the challenges of this century’s evolving international security environment. And we can expect to be continuously targeted by terrorist groups in some part because of this. The

The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the individual author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization with which they are, or have been, affiliated.

National Commission on Terrorism published a report the year prior to the 9/11 attacks on America's preparedness and role in dealing with terrorism, concluding:

Terrorists attack American targets more often than those of any other country. America's pre-eminent role in the world guarantees that this will continue to be the case, and the threat of attacks creating massive casualties is growing. If the United States is to protect itself, if it is to remain a world leader, this nation must develop and continuously refine sound counterterrorism policies appropriate to the rapidly changing world around us.²

This statement was made at a time of anticipated transition for US national security priorities. It was understood that defeating and deterring terrorist threats required sustained US commitment and resources; however, it was clear to policy makers even at the turn of this century that defending America's vital and important interests would require a shift to the Asia Pacific region and a focus on balancing against the People's Republic of China.³

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, provided shocking validation of the commission's warning from the previous year—that the United States “must develop and continuously refine sound counterterrorism policies.” Yet this focus on terrorism meant that the prescient policy prescriptions calling for a shift in emphasis to more effectively engaging and balancing against China—developed in the early months of the Bush administration and continued during the Obama administration—were eclipsed by America's overwhelming response to the 9/11 attacks.

America's subsequent and near-singular focus on interdicting and defending against the terrorist threats responsible for the 9/11 attacks derailed intended efforts to shift policy emphasis to balancing China and engagement in the Asia Pacific. In hindsight, most policy analysts would agree that, even with the possibility of catastrophic terrorist attacks on the US homeland, the pendulum for US policy and budget priorities shifted too far toward addressing the threat of terrorism and away from anticipating and addressing the pacing threat of China and its aggressive actions in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

The United States arguably faces the reverse challenge today. There is broad bipartisan consensus that China poses an existential threat to the United States and its allies. Far more ambiguous—across the political spectrum—is

the assessment of the nature, sources, and degree of the current and expected future threats of terrorism to the United States. In a largely zero-sum fiscal budget environment, we should expect resourcing strategic competition with China and Russia to tap funds formerly devoted to counterterrorism activities. But how far is too far? What are “sound counterterrorism” policies, and what portion of the Department of Defense (DoD) budget should focus on executing these policies?

Two essential truths provided in the 2000 National Commission on Terrorism report cited here have enduring policy relevance today. First, as a global leader on the world stage, America will be the target of terrorist attacks now and in the future. A wide array of terrorist actors will continue to maintain the capabilities and intent to attack America, its allies, and interests around the world. These terrorist actors represent a number of ideological and geopolitical perspectives, including violent jihadists such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, but also threats from state-sponsored terrorism such as Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. Second, effective counterterrorism policies and allocating the resources necessary to implement them require continuous and dynamic assessment based on the evolving nature of the threats as well as competing threats to our national security and important interests.

In the two decades following the 9/11 attacks, US counterterrorism (CT) policies were developed and implemented with comparatively fewer constraints, either in terms of the underlying powers granted to CT programs or their financial cost, stemming from the national trauma that the attacks inflicted, as well as the belief that these policies would be effective at mitigating the terrorist threat. But this era, where prosecuting the Global War on Terrorism was America’s main effort and received the highest budgeting priorities, has ended. Successfully achieving national CT objectives, even as they are further reduced, will require US defense, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies to be pragmatic and disciplined in discerning and identifying which capabilities and activities to sustain, which to refine, and which to abandon.

Road Map

In this paper, I identify a set of guiding principles to assist policy makers and defense officials in the dynamic process of developing and refining our national CT policies and budgeting priorities. In order to successfully navigate and defend US interests in an era of diffuse threats and increasingly constrained

resources, US CT policy decisions should be guided by three general principles: (1) an accurate assessment of the nature, degree, and sources of the threat; (2) a rigorous understanding of US CT capabilities and limitations; and (3) a pragmatic assessment of where CT investments can yield the largest returns. I discuss and provide context for each of these categories and offer specific recommendations for executing effective and efficient US counterterrorism policy in this era of great-power competition (GPC).

Note: Addressing the threat of domestic terrorism, specifically that posed by racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, antigovernment or antiauthority violent extremists, or militia-violent extremists, is an increasingly pressing challenge facing US CT practitioners and policy makers.⁴ This paper limits its scope to focus on foreign terrorist threats to the US, namely jihadist and state-sponsored terror groups, which fall within the jurisdiction of the DoD.

Contemporary Threats from International Terrorist Groups

Although the United States invested in counterterrorism and engaged in CT actions before September 11, 2001, it was only after that point that CT became the top US national security priority, consuming a significant portion of the budgets of a wide array of US government agencies, including the DoD. However, the threat from international terrorism has changed markedly since September 11 in ways that must be recognized to appropriately calibrate our counterterrorism resources to deter and defend against terrorist threats from abroad. I highlight three prominent international terrorist threats and briefly describe how the threats from these groups have changed over time and how these changes have important implications for our CT strategy and resources going forward.

Al-Qaeda and Affiliated Groups

It took only nineteen terrorists trained and resourced by al-Qaeda to execute the deadly 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁵ At the time, al-Qaeda enjoyed sanctuary in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and largely existed as a centralized bureaucratic structure.⁶ The ensuing Global War on Terror initiated by the Bush administration decimated the group's leadership and forced al-Qaeda to alter how it organized itself.⁷ Eventually, the group transformed into more of a constellation of allied and affiliated groups, in which al-Qaeda was the center and exercised some efforts at control over the associated groups.⁸ These groups eventually came to carry out more of the operational activities than the core

al-Qaeda group did, as it became much more of the ideological rather than the operational hub of a networked global jihadist umbrella.

Following the death of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda's founder and long-time leader, in May 2011 during a US Special Operations Forces raid of his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan, al-Qaeda's center group struggled to remain relevant.⁹ The elimination of Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in July 2022 further marginalized the group. But even as its role in planning and executing terrorist attacks has diminished, and continues to diminish, al-Qaeda still inspires and maintains the allegiance of a number of its affiliated groups around the world. This includes the Somalia-based al-Shabaab, Hurras al-Din in Syria, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' in Mali, and a nascent but growing group on the Indian subcontinent known as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). A 2018 estimate put the size of the total network of al-Qaeda at between thirty thousand and forty thousand fighters, but these numbers are hard to verify.¹⁰ The START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism) 2022 Global Terrorism Database indicates that al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups listed here carried out 360 operations in 2020, with the vast majority taking place on the African continent.¹¹

Indeed, Africa remains the most exposed region to jihadist violence, with Nigeria and Libya host to terrorist threats that have the potential to severely destabilize regional governments and wreak significant and costly damage to state and economic capacity. Boko Haram's activities in Northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, and Niger have elicited international condemnation, and French special forces have been deployed to support building up nascent foreign internal defense capabilities.¹² Analysts agree that it is essential for global security and American interests that global terrorism does not metastasize even further in Africa, where it has the potential to devastate fragile paths toward economic development for millions and trigger bloody, inter-ethnic conflict on a scale unseen since the 1990s.¹³

Islamic State

The group that currently calls itself the Islamic State was, in an earlier era, al-Qaeda's main affiliate in Iraq. Eventually, as the Syrian civil war heated up, so too did tensions between the group then known as ISIS or ISIL and al-Qaeda. Eventually, the participants in this intragroup jihadi conflict deemed reconciliation impossible and split up. The Islamic State then

became the most prominent and violent force in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴ Eventually, the Islamic State counted upward of sixty thousand members and held de facto control over forty-one thousand square miles, comprising nearly half of Iraq's territory and a third of Syria's.¹⁵ As the group grew, it called for pledges of allegiance from other jihadi groups around the world, eventually collecting pledges from groups from Algeria to East Asia.

From that high-water mark, the Islamic State has seen its formal territorial control shrink, but it maintains a robust group of affiliates. Again, this is especially the case in Africa, which has seen significant operational activity among the group's several affiliates, including Central Africa Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Greater Sahara, Somalia, and West Africa Province.¹⁶ In mid-2022, it was reported that over half of all Islamic State's global provinces and half of its claimed operations were in Africa.¹⁷ Beyond Africa, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) continues its attacks, seeking to undermine whoever the government is in Afghanistan. In August 2021, ISIS-K carried out a suicide bombing amid the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, killing nearly two hundred, including thirteen US military members.¹⁸ The following year, in August 2022, ISIS-K carried out a suicide bombing targeting a school, killing as many as fifty-two people, mainly young women. Although the number cannot be verified, in its magazines, the group has claimed more than eight hundred attacks for all affiliated organizations through November 2022.¹⁹

State-Sponsored Terrorism

Perhaps the most glaring example of the potential danger of terrorist organizations aided by a state sponsor comes from Iran and the constellation of actors supported by the regime operating all over the globe. Ever since the fall of the shah in 1979, Iran and the United States have long been adversaries on the global stage. Over time, this antagonism resulted in Iran providing support directly to groups such as Badr Organization, Fatemiyoun Division, Hezbollah, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, for a variety of terrorism and insurgent activities against the United States in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.²⁰

Although it is more difficult to get a sense of the overall operational activity of Iran's proxy network, several anecdotes are useful in illustrating the network's efforts. For example, in an incident on September 11, 2021, an Iranian proxy allegedly flew two drones filled with explosives toward coalition forces at Erbil International Airport to "remind the Americans of the September 11 attacks in our own way."²¹ More broadly, an examination of Iranian support

to proxies in Syria found that Iran was seeking to insert itself by providing military support to proxies and also through the provision of social services, logistical help, and ideological guidance.²² Finally, the US Department of Justice released indictments against Iranian agents attempting to develop a plot against senior US officials, including former secretary of state Michael Pompeo and former national security advisor John Bolton.²³ While these plots might arguably not be considered cases of terrorism, they highlight Iran's potential threat when it chooses to exert itself to advance its foreign policy interests.

Understanding the Threat

The brief overviews of three current international terrorist threats highlighted above indicate that, despite the significant activity, none of these groups, especially al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, look today as they did at their inception or even at the moment of their most prominent attacks. Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, and the Islamic State have largely decentralized in response to counterterrorism pressure. Moreover, a large number of leadership losses in these groups and networks have deprived them of strategic continuity and forced them to focus on short-term survival rather than achieving their long-term goals.

But this does not suggest that threats from international terrorist groups are now nor will remain insignificant—quite the contrary. According to a yearly analysis of the trajectory of prominent al-Qaeda and Islamic State entities, none of the thirteen were “weakening” in 2021. There was a slight improvement in 2022, with two of the fourteen in the “weakening” category.²⁴ An accurate understanding of the threat suggests that the United States—and the world—cannot choose to be done with counterterrorism, no matter how important and resource intensive it becomes to compete with strategic rivals Russia and China.

Succinctly, international terrorist groups possess the desire to strike the United States and its allies, as well as the capabilities to do so. The National Counterterrorism Center describes the al-Qaeda threat aptly: “Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East remain a resilient organization committed to conducting attacks in the United States and against American interests abroad.”²⁵ The former commander of US CENTCOM, General Kenneth McKenzie, made a statement about the Islamic State in 2020 that offers excellent and enduring guidance to keep in mind when assessing the anticipated threats from international terrorist groups, “This

threat is not going away. There's never going to be a time, I believe, when either ISIS or whatever follows ISIS is going to be completely absent from the global stage."²⁶ Continued CT pressure will be critical to keeping these groups, especially their external operations capabilities, at bay. But this pressure can be challenging to generate in a resource-constrained environment, despite the impressive CT capabilities the United States has developed over the past twenty years.

Capabilities and Limitations of US Counterterrorism Strategy

An array of international terrorist groups maintain the strength and intent to threaten US interests overseas and at home, and this threat is enduring. Developing and continuously refining effective and efficient US CT strategies and policies in this era where priorities have shifted to resourcing competition with our strategic rivals will require a disciplined focus on exploiting the greatest strengths of America's CT capabilities and mitigating our weaknesses. As our strategies evolve, we will expect to ask those implementing CT policy and executing operations to "do the same with less," i.e., protect the homeland and defend vital and important interests against the threat of terrorism with fewer relative resources than were provided in the previous two decades.

And this is happening now. DoD and Intelligence Community partners focused on CT are experiencing drastic cuts to their budget and reductions in personnel assigned.²⁷ DoD budget proposals over the past several years have seen the near elimination of overseas contingency operations funding, a separate line item that provided significant support for US military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the southern Philippines, among other regions of operational importance where our forces conducted or supported CT missions. Our defense budgets are also shifting away from acquiring weapons and platforms optimized for interdicting terrorist and insurgent threats and instead moving toward procuring the systems and equipment needed to prepare and prevail in a conflict with other states.²⁸

Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism—a Viable Way Ahead or Oxymoron?

President Biden announced our new "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism strategy hours after the departure of the last American military forces from Afghanistan. This approach "without boots on the ground" entailed interdicting terrorist targets through intelligence-informed drone strikes launched

from secure locations outside conflict zones.²⁹ The strategy's efficacy received validation by the targeted killing of al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on July 31, 2022, in a drone strike at the residential home where he was staying in downtown Kabul. The strike resulted from careful and dedicated intelligence work by US agencies on the lookout for the return of top al-Qaeda figures to Afghanistan.³⁰

The US intelligence officials and other professionals responsible for the Zawahiri strike deserve significant praise for the successful outcome of this strike. But most experts agree that the conditions that led to the successful targeting and discriminate interdiction of Zawahiri will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce against other terrorist targets.³¹ Importantly, the strategic aims of over-the-horizon counterterrorism are arguably ill-defined. Lethal interdiction and attrition of high-value terrorist targets are more accurately viewed as an effective counterterrorism *tactic*—not a strategy in itself—and can be successfully employed only if sufficient intelligence and targeting data are available.

In developing a more cost-effective and efficient CT strategy, US policy makers must avoid conflating measures of performance—the attrition of terrorists through kinetic actions—with measures of effectiveness—protecting the US homeland and our allies and partners from costly terrorist attacks. America's current CT strategy relies heavily on over-the-horizon CT and can point to examples of successful performance across the Middle East, East Africa, and Central Asia. Policy makers are obliged to develop viable and sustainable counterterrorism strategies that reflect current and anticipated budget realities, ensuring they have clearly defined goals and objectives and focus on effectively and efficiently achieving priority strategic ends.³² A lack of coherence in our strategy is perhaps the biggest current limitation to our ability to carry out effective, efficient, and sustained counterterrorism operations and activities.

Biggest “No Bang” for the Buck: Optimize Returns on CT Investment

The total costs of funding counterterrorism efforts over the last two decades have been significant. US aggregate counterterrorism spending—measured from the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks through the end of 2017, when the Trump administration's National Security Strategy, marking a strategic shift to great-power competition, was released—is estimated to have exceeded \$2.8 trillion. This is a sixteenfold increase over combined CT

spending in the year prior to 9/11, amounting to 15 percent of the \$18 trillion of total discretionary spending for that period. This figure includes a broad range of CT-related efforts, including government spending on homeland security, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and other international counterterrorism activities and programs. US CT spending peaked in 2008 at \$260 billion—22 percent of total discretionary spending—and fell to \$175 billion in 2017, which was 14 percent of discretionary spending that year.³³

The DoD has shouldered a significant portion of the CT budgetary burden throughout this period. In 2008, at the height of spending on CT, the DoD expended over 30 percent of the total defense budget toward CT-related activities and requirements—this amounted to \$206.7 billion allocated toward CT and \$479.2 billion toward non-CT-related expenditures. In 2017, the DoD spent 17.6 percent of the defense budget on activities considered CT related for a total of \$96 billion, compared to \$549.9 billion on non-CT-related defense spending that year.³⁴ Since 9/11, the average US defense spending on CT as a percentage of its total budget is estimated to be nearly 20 percent.³⁵

How much lower can the DoD budget for CT-related activities go without incurring unacceptable risks is difficult to determine and will be judged in hindsight, e.g., did the United States suffer a catastrophic attack from an international terrorist group? Resourcing the formal shift in US-stated strategic priorities to great-power competition and identifying the inevitable trade-offs required to do so going forward will not be easy. The persistence of threats to the United States from international terrorism and the decreasing resources available for combating these threats demand that CT investments target opportunities where they will have the greatest impact at the least cost. Several areas where the United States can achieve cost-effective returns on its CT investments and recommendations on opportunities to do so are provided below.

Strengthening Counterterrorism Partnerships

The 2018 National Defense Strategy identified strengthening alliances and building new partnerships as one of DoD's three major lines of effort.³⁶ This emphasis on leveraging America's comparative advantage of its dense network of alliances and partnerships is reflected in the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS), which also emphasizes, "Mutually-beneficial Alliances and partnerships are an enduring strength for the United States, and are critical to achieving

our objectives.”³⁷ The advantages and opportunities afforded by these relationships can be translated to develop and sustain effective counterterrorism with reduced unilateral US actions or the forward presence of troops.

One representative example of the cost-effectiveness of the partnership approach to counterterrorism comes from Kenya. On September 21, 2013, four members of the Somali militant group al-Shabaab entered the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, with assault rifles and grenades. When the incident was over, seventy-one people were dead, including the perpetrators, in an attack covered in local and international media for days. Several years later, in January 2019, al-Shabaab carried out another attack in a Nairobi hotel that left nearly two dozen dead. In the wake of this tragedy and recognizing the continuing threat al-Shabaab posed to Kenyan citizens, the Kenyan and US governments formed the first Joint Terrorism Task Force outside the United States. This initiative, designed to provide Kenyan investigators with access to and training in more advanced law enforcement techniques to combat al-Shabaab, was credited by the Kenyan government for playing a role in reducing the level of terrorist activity in the country. This approach, in which the US provides training and logistical assistance to partners but does not take the lead, can be replicated elsewhere and potentially deliver the type of cost-effective returns necessary to make it a viable and sustainable option in a resource-constrained environment.

Increasing the role and contribution of our allies and partners in interdicting and defending against international terrorist groups with global reach can be achieved by changing policies and without major increases to the defense budget, which is perhaps the most cost-effective and efficient approach for enhancing US CT policy now and going forward. Every additional CT mission, role, and activity shouldered by our allies and partners can translate into reducing the financial burden formerly carried by the United States. Beyond this direct cost reduction, decreasing US presence and activities abroad generally undercuts the narratives of international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS that point to US overseas interventions as a direct and deliberate threat to Islam.

An effective way to bolster the role of CT partnerships in executing US counterterrorism strategy, for example, is expanding information and intelligence sharing beyond the “Five Eyes” countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and empowering key partners with greater access to US information and intelligence without compromising sensitive sources and methods. Several countries across the

Indo-Pacific region, in particular, can play a greater role in executing a mutually beneficial counterterrorism strategy through closer cooperation with the United States. Treaty allies like Japan and even South Korea have the potential to play a much more prominent and impactful role in regional CT with greater information sharing and access to intelligence—all of which could be provided with a limited security risk.

Beyond our formal allies, CT cooperation with many of our key partners can and should also be increased. India, for example, is designated as a major defense partner of the United States with a range of defense-enabling agreements that can facilitate secure communications, intelligence sharing, geospatial information sharing, and technology transfer.³⁸ India borders and is close to the sanctuaries of some of the most dangerous international terrorist groups. It also shares interests in CT cooperation with the United States, which are far from fully exploited. Indonesia is another prime example of a US partner with vast potential for increased CT cooperation that can be more fully realized by developing closer and more interoperable defense and intelligence relationships. This would require changes in policies and restrictions, not increases in spending.³⁹

Know Your Enemy—Why and How They Operate

Terrorist attacks can be viewed as symptoms of even more sinister underlying causes. Cost-effective CT policies should strive to target the root causes of attacks directed or inspired by international terrorist groups. I have argued that the actual center of gravity of the violent movements that sustain Islamic extremist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS can be understood as “the ideas of radical Jihadist thought.”⁴⁰ These ideas—not necessarily the individual leaders themselves—can insulate and protect jihadist groups against external pressure and enable jihadist movements to spread even when the leaders of these groups are killed or captured. Ultimately, “it is not possible to capture, kill, or incarcerate ideas.”⁴¹ When developing and executing cost-effective policies to address international terrorist threats, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other jihadist terrorist groups should not be viewed strictly in terms of the organizational charts and bureaucratic hierarchies used to describe a more conventional military enemy. Doing so will emphasize more kinetic CT strategies and policies, which we know from experience are expensive and can have limited efficacy.⁴²

During the darkest days of the US intervention in Iraq, researchers at West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center published seminal work concluding,

“The key to defeating the jihadi movement is identifying its strengths and weaknesses so that the former may be countered or co-opted and the latter exploited. . . . The people who know these strengths and weaknesses best are the jihadis themselves; one just needs to know where (and how) to look for their insights.”⁴³ Terrorist groups have ideological and organizational vulnerabilities that can be exploited using information that is available online or otherwise is “hiding in plain sight.” Responsibly releasing this material and making it available to the public can put terrorists on the defensive and is relatively cost-free for the DoD to initiate. And the DoD literally has terabytes of data available on the types of information that can make terrorists vulnerable if made public.⁴⁴

Cost-effective CT policies will fund efforts to better access and exploit information gleaned from terrorists themselves in order to help discredit and delegitimize the hostile ideology driving jihadist-inspired terrorism and to exploit internal weaknesses and fractures within these terrorist organizations. Some specific activities that effective and efficient CT policy could support include (1) establishing programs that translate and analyze influential jihadi strategic texts and other communications; (2) exploiting the divisions and critical vulnerabilities identified by the terrorists themselves through their written and intercepted communications; and (3) taking advantage of opportunities to better leverage diverse communities of expertise on jihadist thinking.⁴⁵

Technology

International terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS, despite their desire for a return to a medieval-era caliphate, are not made up of non-technologically savvy individuals plotting the return of society back to the days before computers and cell phones. Far from this, today’s terrorists are internet-savvy and dedicated users of social media, drones, and other advanced technologies. This reliance by terrorist groups on technology, however, can be a significant weakness, especially given the advantage that governments have in expertise, access to technology, and resources. For example, when it declared itself a caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State wielded one of the most potent propaganda production and publication infrastructures for any terrorist group, with the ability to regularly produce compelling photo reports, videos, and newsletters. Yet, the very technology upon which the group was relying also made it vulnerable to efforts in cyberspace to undermine its efficacy and increase risks to operational security.

Operation Glowing Symphony, discussed publicly for the first time in 2019, is an example of technology-enabled CT and the type that effective and efficient CT policy should fully support and exploit. This operation saw analysts and cyber specialists from US Cyber Command and the National Security Agency hack into accounts held by key Islamic State media figures, lock them out of their accounts, obtain intelligence information, and make the distribution of propaganda from central servers difficult or impossible.⁴⁶ This “no boots on the ground” operation was highly effective and executed with limited risks and costs.

Cost-effective US CT efforts will exploit the vulnerabilities terrorist use of technology creates and better leverage the advantages of US access to advanced technologies in developing and implementing counterterrorism responses. Significantly, most technological advances that have the potential to enhance our CT capabilities originate in the commercial technology base—not in government labs or by major defense primes. A number of forward-leaning initiatives by the DoD exist to facilitate the development, adoption, and deployment of technologies critical to our national security, such as those initiated by the Defense Innovation Unit and the recently established Office of Strategic Capital.⁴⁷ Technologies that empower more cost-effective and efficient CT applications must remain a priority for these efforts.

“Dual-Use” Policies Supporting Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition

Counterterrorism and great-power competition are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and funding them is not zero-sum relative to the two policy priorities. The capabilities developed over twenty years of intense CT operations can be repurposed to support activities supporting GPC objectives and priorities as well. Some of the most cost-effective and efficient investments in counterterrorism in this era of great-power competition support both CT and GPC interests and objectives. For example, international military training and exercises will sometimes be more palatable and supportable for US partners if they are designed as counterterrorism cooperation and avoid the optics of being geared toward other security threats that might subject these partners to an expected backlash from China. Former state counterterrorism coordinator Nathan Sales sums up positive externalities of partner CT cooperation as having the ability to “cement relationships with existing and potential partners” and “serving as a reminder of the rewards of cooperation.”⁴⁸

Cost-effective CT policy will seek to include CT cooperation and activities with the added upside benefit of strengthening bilateral and multilateral relationships and interoperability, which will be critical in supporting GPC objectives.

A compelling example of a past investment justified by its CT efficacy but also significantly supporting broader GPC objectives and priorities was the limited US military and contractor presence maintained in Afghanistan in the year prior to the abrupt US departure in August 2021. Consider the operational and deterrent value in the GPC context of preventing the total collapse of even a highly flawed, elected Afghan government and maintaining a de facto US and NATO base like Bagram Airfield in a country bordering China, Iran, Pakistan, and three former Soviet republics now on Russia's southern flank. In his post-US withdrawal address, President Biden claimed, "And there's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition, than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan."⁴⁹ In this era of competition and strategic rivalry among great powers, China, Russia, Iran, and others more likely applauded the departure of US troops from Afghanistan. US strategy and policies must avoid such debacles going forward. The return on investment of a relatively modest commitment of troops—less than 7 percent of the size of the New York Police Department in the case of US forces deployed to Afghanistan in 2021—far exceeded the costs of maintaining them, especially when viewed in terms of its efficacy in supporting both CT and GPC priorities.⁵⁰

Final Thoughts

The opportunity costs of sustaining the level of spending and the strategic priority placed on counterterrorism by the US in the two decades since the 9/11 attacks have been significant. In the context of competition with strategic rivals like China, the United States arguably lost considerable ground measured across a range of indicators, from degrading our edge in critical technologies to ceding strategic influence in areas like the South China Sea. Prevailing in this century's strategic competition demands significant investment and will remain a major focus for defense budgeting, requiring compromise across competing national security priorities. As our political leaders and policy makers assess the threats to US interests that will inform the trade-offs and calculated risks taken in our CT policies and budgets going forward, however, it is important they remember that the threat to the United

States from international terrorism is determined by the real capabilities and intentions of these groups and not by best-case scenarios and untested assumptions made by well-intended government officials obliged to allocate resources to fund national security priorities as determined by our senior political leadership.⁵¹

America must maintain a disciplined commitment to investing in sufficient CT capabilities despite competing threats and budget priorities. No president or political leader can unilaterally declare that our war against the terrorist threats responsible for catastrophic events like the 9/11 attacks is over—our enemies get a vote. But neither can any president or political leader afford to misappropriate excessive funding in a largely zero-sum budget environment to threats posed by terrorism to the detriment of responding to major geopolitical challenges facing the United States.

Combating terrorism is an extraordinarily challenging endeavor, even when it is a national priority and is resourced accordingly. The threat from international terrorism is enduring, and budgets available to the DoD to address these threats are dwindling. Sun Tzu warns that “to defend everywhere is to defend nowhere.” Decisions on where and how to defend against international terrorist threats and to what level are as much art as science. Difficult compromises lie ahead in determining the appropriate allocation of resources to defend against terrorist threats concurrent with prevailing in the competition with strategic rivals and addressing other threats to the United States’ vital and important interests.

Notes

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5. Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, US Government, July 22, 2004.
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