



The Tyranny of the Tactical

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THE priority in the struggle against political extremism and terrorism is to escape from the tyranny of the day-to-day tactical fight and develop an obtainable and defensible strategic-level set of objectives. To develop such a strategic approach, it is necessary to define your goals. This is, of course, vital for building a whole-of-government approach to security measures.

What are you trying to achieve with your strategic goals? Is it the elusive goal of the eradication of terrorism by military means? With terrorism and extremism having been a part of political life for more than 2,500 years, eradication at this point seems unlikely. Or is your strategic aim the more pragmatic one of denying terrorists what they seek – which is to disrupt our way of life? Terrorism itself is an extreme act of political communication, which aims to draw governments into over-reaction. This can cause further radicalization and recruitment for more extremism and terrorism. It is critical to understand your own aims and objectives before launching into action.

Need for new approaches

It is easy to talk of change, but implementation of a new policy is never easy. Bureaucratic organizational change, the most common government response, is unlikely to work in most cases. However, organizational change plus new methods and working habits may produce results. But no government gets to start with a blank canvas. We have to adapt and build around existing institutions and their people. At this point, however, there are, frequently, gaps between new policies and getting them to work. The resources required for training and development are often scarce or slow in coming.

While the events of 9/11 were a shock and they re-ordered many priorities, all of the elements required for change were in place before 2001. Globalization, new technology, new means of communication (the internet in particular), the disappearance of the bipolar power bloc system, the diffusion of state power and control, a rising influence of sub-governmental organizations, the rise of political Islam, and the growing threat of terror are not new-found problems.

One other factor that confuses policy thinking is the frequent misunderstandings between “threats” and actual “risks”. We are often given laundry lists of vulnerabilities that could be exploited by nefarious terrorists. Frequently, governments have not done a national level risk assessment to weed out potential threats from actual risks, which are based on probability and impact factors. As such, policymakers are often trying to react to low probability threats which may have little impact while more probable risks may not get addressed at all.

Many of the risks that do face us are asymmetric in nature and dealing with them can be

challenging. Asymmetric attack perpetrators avoid attacking the strongest points of their adversaries while seeking to exploit vulnerabilities. There is an implicit element of surprise in the timing of the attack; the perpetrators expect that many attacks will be required over time to break down the will of the stronger power.

It should be clear at the outset of any policy discussion that the primary weapon for prevailing in the face of asymmetric threats is knowledge. While raw power does have its place, power alone cannot buy freedom from fear. Some of the world's most powerful nations are currently its most fearful. Knowledge derived from broad studies and good intelligence work is the requirement.

Getting this knowledge can be a major challenge, especially in the face of the barriers that have been built in the past. It is still a common habit in many quarters to think of intelligence as being either foreign or domestic. While this model may have been useful in the Cold War period, it is questionable now unless the intelligence gained from both is thoroughly integrated as close to the front lines as possible.

Another barrier that still needs more attention is the division between human sources of intelligence and technical forms. Traditionally, these two major fields of intelligence have been separated. But with increasingly complex intelligence demands and shorter time periods involved, getting the initial fine grains of intelligence is tougher. To facilitate this analysis work, human intelligence and technical intelligence have to work hand in hand at the operational level.

In order to break down barriers and achieve a whole-of-government approach, the relationships between the security and intelligence services and law enforcement must be closely examined. In many countries, the newer forms of terrorism tend to operate in the areas which are more noted for their gaps between these agencies rather than their overlap. Until these gaps are closed off, they are naturally existing vulnerabilities which will be exploited.

The Future

What of the future? If we continue to adapt and meet the present threats, are we secure? This remains a debatable point, as the latent threats in the future may be more serious than the conventional terrorist threats we face now. What about nuclear, biological, chemical and the radiological threats? In order to prepare for the longer term threats, it is essential to start thinking about the "unthinkable" now. A vital role exists for the scientific and academic communities in thinking about these problems without being alarmist. But to be clear, the threat will change and we will face new challenges in coping. The most likely "unthinkable" event at the moment is a radiological dispersal device causing contamination in a widespread urban area, but future terrorism threats may entail something as unusual as the genetic manipulation of a virus. In other words, a terrorist event without a blast.

Louise Richardson, author of *The Roots of Terrorism*, spells out six rules for countering terrorism to which we can add a seventh. They are:

- Have a defensible and achievable goal;
- Live by your principles – don't be goaded by the terrorist into behaving differently;
- Know your enemy, intimately;

- Isolate terrorists within their own communities;
- Engage others in countering terrorism with you;
- Have patience and keep your perspective – be prepared for the long-term;
- Build a process which is unambiguous and can function strategically and operationally and in is open-ended.

Governments need to establish national strategic aims which require the clearest lines of authority and levels of competence for decision-taking. Above all, it is about enabling middle-management to work in an imaginative, flexible and lateral fashion. This will require training and practice exercises, as well as scenario planning and building capacity. Little point exists for working in stove pipes which merely come together, if at all, at the top level. Stated another way, we need to escape from the tyranny of the tactical and advance to a strategic, whole-of-government approach.

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