

The Strategic Illogic of Counterterrorism Policy

In the last few years, the Islamic State, or IS, has become a central focus of public debates about U.S. national security. A May 2016 poll by the Pew Research Center reported that 80 percent of Americans think IS poses the greatest international threat to the United States.¹ As IS has vastly expanded its activities beyond its borders, debates about how to best defeat the group typically assume that military power will play the primary role in its defeat. The Republican and Democratic presidential contenders were no exception. President-elect Donald Trump called IS “barbarians” who threaten us from their “launching pad for terrorism against the West.”² To respond to this threat, Trump has indicated that he would deploy 20,000 to 30,000 Americans, including ground troops, in order “to knock out [IS].”³ Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton’s strategy emphasized eliminating IS’s strongholds in Iraq and Syria through intensifying the coalition air campaign, increasing support for local Arab and Kurdish forces, and pursuing a diplomatic strategy in Iraq and Syria.⁴

Each new terrorist attack on a Western target stokes the American public’s fears and strengthens these beliefs, providing incentives for politicians to recommend reactionary countermeasures both on the home front and abroad. Suggestions to carpet-bomb IS strongholds, seal U.S. borders, increase drone activity, and send more troops hold a lot of weight in the current political environment. While the use of military force is an important component in the war against IS, kinetic activity has become a strategy in and of itself, and the public expects it.

A critical element is missing from these discussions: How and why has the kinetic option become the primary point around which other policies are

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formulated? How might this affect future policy choices? Based on extensive interviews with government and non-government officials, we suggest there is an illogic

There is an illogic to U.S. counterterrorism policy based on three inter-related factors.

to U.S. counterterrorism policy based on three interrelated factors that have made kinetic activity the default option. First, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a counterterrorism success or failure. Second, public opinion and institutional politics create an environment that encourages policies which produce quick, visible results and discourages policies which require long-term investment. Third, there is little public and political confi-

dence in alternatives to the use of military force, such as a deterrence policy. These factors have made kinetic action a strategy instead of a tactic, and have severely limited the United States' ability to employ more far-reaching, long-term policies.

The policy implications, particularly for the Trump administration, are clear. The current political environment—one in which politicians and the media benefit from exploiting fear—hinders, or even punishes, reasoned national security voices which question the role of kinetic activity, or the extent to which IS poses a threat to U.S. national security. This may in fact facilitate the military escalation of the conflict in which non-kinetic alternatives are ignored or dismissed. If something is not done to change this pattern, the United States will continue to apply suboptimal strategies that could result in the weakening of U.S. power and greater loss of American lives.

A Kinetic Default

The illogic of U.S. terrorism policy has deep historic and bureaucratic roots. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, U.S. counterterrorism policy has relied heavily upon military tools. From the 2001 war in Afghanistan to the 2003 war in Iraq, the Bush administration's "Global War on Terror" was defined by a military response to militant violence. These military options were based on the belief that kinetic tactics were necessary to degrade and defeat al-Qaeda. Critical of involving the nation in another long-term war, the Obama administration articulated a slight change: in a May 2013 address to the National Defense University, President Obama announced that targeted operations to dismantle terrorist networks would be a critical aspect of the administration's counterterrorism strategy.⁵ Precision strikes through the use of airstrikes, raids, and unmanned aerial vehicles have thus formed the basis of the Obama administration's counterterrorism policy.

Many former and current government officials indicate that they have concerns regarding the long-term effectiveness of kinetic activities. Some former and even current government officials have suggested that they view military force as a “placeholder” to enable other policies to take effect.⁶ While some kinetic counterterrorism actions seek to eliminate individuals and weaken their networks when there is an immediate threat to the homeland, one intended effect of the kinetic activity is to stabilize the security environment so other strategies might work.⁷

But kinetic operations that aim to create time and space to stabilize the environment also carry risks. These operations can inspire retaliatory attacks, fuel recruitment, and result in unnecessary civilian casualties both within and outside the countries in which IS operates, all dynamics that many policymakers and defense officials recognize. For example, General Paul Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argues that fighting IS in Iraq and Syria using indiscriminate tactics could result in high collateral damage and bolster its recruitment capabilities. In response to the suggestion that the United States should carpet bomb IS, General Selva asserted, “Anything that we do to feed that particular frame of thinking counters our national security, and we have to be very careful about how we prosecute a campaign that appears to be an indiscriminate attempt to attack [IS] and the population that surrounds it.”⁸

Lack of Definitional Clarity

The baseline of the illogic of counterterrorism is that the standards of success are unrealistic, unclear, and possibly not meaningful. While the Obama administration’s objectives are clear—degrading and ultimately destroying IS through airstrikes, increasing support to forces fighting IS, preventing attacks, and providing humanitarian assistance⁹—assessing success or failure is vague. Many government officials are frustrated with the lack of clear, substantive standards for assessment and the gap in realistic expectations.

Nonetheless, when pressed, some officials have argued that success will occur when a terrorist group no longer poses a threat to our national security. Others see success as a reduction in group activity, yet both of these metrics acknowledge that the group still exists.¹⁰ In speaking to domestic audiences, politicians may say that we will destroy IS, but many counterterrorism officials within and outside government know this is an impossible task, especially when officials publicly acknowledge that defeating IS may not mean its end. One important example is the metaphor of terrorism as a “cancer” requiring sustained action: “it will take

Assessing success or failure in counterterrorism is vague.

time to eradicate a cancer like [IS],” Obama said in 2014.¹¹ However, official U.S. policy is to destroy it.

These definitional problems and unclear standards are not necessarily new. Both scholarly and policy circles have made some attempts to measure the success of terrorism. For example, although the 2006 National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism argued that targeting militant leaders would result in organizational degradation, it failed to offer a metric by which to determine whether a group has degraded. The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism similarly lacked any quantifiable metric for success, focusing instead on factors critical to success. Even in the aftermath of 9/11, there has been no consistent scorecard by which to evaluate the success of counterterrorism policies.¹² More recently, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, stated that the success of U.S. campaigns against IS can be measured by a group’s territory, resources, and foreign fighters,¹³ yet successes in these domains are even difficult to measure. These campaigns often lack the causal connection to the desired objective.

There are quantifiable metrics that can be used to measure the success of counterterrorism policies, such as amount of territory held by militants, number of attacks, number of foreign fighters, or amount of communal support. However, even quantifiable measures that could assuage public fears may not be the most accurate representation of the situation. IS may lose control over a certain amount of territory or recruit fewer members, but it is still seen as capable of carrying out attacks and posing an existential threat to our homeland. Even if clear metrics are possible, it is still difficult to determine and communicate when policies are working, particularly if the public has a different perception of threat, end-state, and effectiveness of kinetic operations. Policymakers consistently cite the importance of degrading and defeating terrorist groups, and without a clear, meaningful metric by which to evaluate the degradation or even defeat of groups, the United States has come largely to rely on kinetic measures.

Public Opinion & Bureaucracy

Public opinion can be an extremely powerful force for action or inaction in foreign policy, especially in a democratic republic. The pressure that mounts for the United States to do something about IS, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks on the homeland or its close allies, underscores this notion. Because the American public views radical militant organizations, such as IS, as the greatest threat to U.S. national security, there is tremendous pressure to respond to this threat. As previously mentioned, a May 2016 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 80 percent of the population thought that the “Islamic militant group known as IS remains the American public’s top international concern.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, a December 2015 Gallup poll found that Americans believe terrorism to be the single most important problem for the nation.¹⁵

This public pressure may actually distort what true national security interests are and affect our long-term thinking. The public's prioritization of threats stands in contrast to most of the national security establishment. Traditional threats such as the resurgence of Russia, the rise of China, and rogue proliferators like North Korea are more important, even if the public often does not see it as such.¹⁶ When the threat of groups like IS are linked to U.S. interests in the Middle East more broadly, such as the stability and security of U.S. allies in the region, there is greater overlap between public opinion and the national security elite. Nonetheless, these differences in threat perception also have implications for the types of policies the public would support.

Thus, in order to quell public concerns regarding the threat posed by IS, U.S. counterterrorism policies have relied on kinetic responses that are quick and observable to the public. Kinetic responses demonstrate that the government is doing *something*, that it has the resolve and capacity to effectively fight terrorism. Studies have shown it is a way to address the demands of the public and to show that the government is taking action.¹⁷

Kinetic responses demonstrate that the government is doing *something*.

There is widespread recognition in the Department of Defense (DoD) and elsewhere in the U.S. government that it cannot bomb its way to victory, meaning that it cannot rely on purely kinetic or military options in order to prevail against terrorism. In fact, the strategy to counter IS and other terrorist organizations includes significant efforts that fall within the realms of public diplomacy, messaging, reconstruction, stabilization, and improved governance.¹⁸ Nevertheless, institutional politics and interagency competition for resources has resulted in a reliance on the kinetic option at the expense of other more comprehensive responses.

Many defense officials, including former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have recognized the need “for a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development.”¹⁹ Other former military leaders, such as former NATO SACEUR U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis and former CENTCOM Commander U.S. Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, have echoed the need for the United States to invest in diplomacy and development.²⁰ Moreover, the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review concluded that future military operations themselves would require enhanced capability to understand social and cultural terrains as well as various dimensions of human behavior. For example, “to meet the demands of

irregular warfare and operate effectively alongside other U.S. agencies, allies or partners,” DoD proposed to “increase investments focused on developing and maintaining appropriate language, cultural, and information technology skills.”²¹ Programs of this sort were employed in a dual-use capacity, supporting the global war on terror and preventing or mitigating instability-induced conflict.

One problem is that “stabilization,” “reconstruction,” and “civil affairs,” which are Defense Department activities, can sound too much like foreign aid to some and are seen as the domain of the State Department. The State Department, which often takes the lead statutorily on many of these projects, suffers from funding and capacity disadvantages. As one former Pentagon official told us, the State Department does not have lobbyists.²² In an age of budget austerity, this can have an even greater impact on funding the type of materials and goods that are used for kinetic responses and that have strong domestic proponents in the U.S. industrial base. It is difficult for government officials, irrespective of their agency, to lobby for post-conflict stabilization efforts. For example, the U.S. Army has recently deactivated one of only two civil active-duty civil affairs brigades, the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade.²³ All of these complicating factors mitigate agency cooperation on long-term issues. Not only that, they may even facilitate cooperation on kinetic issues that are politically feasible, better funded, and can draw a consensus across institutions, agencies, and offices.

Deterrence

Finally, there is no clear national policy for deterring non-state actors, and as a result the United States has relied on coercive strategies that are based on the use of kinetic force. Deterrence is a strategic interaction intended to discourage the enemy from taking military action by raising the costs and lowering the benefits of aggression. In order to deter an adversary, a credible threat of retaliation is necessary, and if those threats are actually carried out, then deterrence has failed by definition. The credibility of a deterrent threat depends upon military power and the belief that an actor will use it. However, communicating those intentions to an adversary is difficult.

These are some of the reasons why deterring terrorists is so difficult and why many believe deterrence is not possible at all against them. Terrorists are seen as irrational and willing to suffer high costs, including martyrdom, in order to reach their goal. Moreover, transnational terrorist organizations do not typically have a homeland in the way that states do, making it difficult to threaten retaliation upon a specific territory.

Government officials recognize that deterring terrorism is difficult and requires a strategy different from that developed during the Cold War. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review highlighted the importance of deterring both state and non-

state actors;²⁴ yet, the logic of deterrence is still under-theorized in counterterrorism policy.²⁵ The fundamental risk in coercing a weak state that hosts or supports a terrorist group is destabilization of the regime or the breakdown of the host state. In these cases, terrorist groups often take advantage of the state's lack of control. The host state may not have enough leverage to pressure the terrorist group for an effective deterrence policy.

There have been some attempts to understand deterrence within the framework of terrorism, but the situation is complicated. In theory, terrorists could be deterred by presenting a credible threat of counteraction that would deny their ability to carry out successful attacks or weaken their capacity. Military engagement is one means by which to make a threat of retaliation believable.²⁶ While threatening kinetic military action against an adversary is seen as an effective way to credibly impose costs high enough to deter terrorists, any actual *use* of kinetic military action to retaliate against terrorist activity implies a failure of deterrence.

This is because effective deterrence against terrorist organizations requires a credible threat of retaliation—a threat of more to come. Carrying out military action before the threat has been credibly conveyed undermines the logic upon which the strategy of deterrence is based. Even further, it is possible that kinetic responses can undermine the goal of deterrence by creating more incentives for terrorist groups to retaliate. Studies have shown that kinetic action can have counterproductive outcomes such as radicalization, recruitment, or support from local communities, making groups stronger and more capable to carry out attacks. Thus, in the absence of an alternative, the kinetic military option is often the default.

Simultaneous Success and Failure

The U.S. reliance on kinetic responses to terrorism has come at the expense of more comprehensive counterterrorism policies. One example of an alternative is The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, or TSCTP. The TSCTP is an effort to create a whole-of-government approach that emphasizes interagency coordination, cooperation with regional allies, and the development of area-specific metrics by which to evaluate the success of counterterrorism policies. While some of these programs saw a marked decline in militant activity, others suffered from some of the same institutional and public pressures regarding threat perception that have resulted in a U.S. reliance on military solutions against the threat of terrorism.

The TSCTP, created in 2005 as a successor to the Pan-Sahara Initiative (PSI), is the government's primary counterterrorism program in the Sahel and Maghreb across ten countries. The State Department, with the Africa Bureau as the lead, works with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), DOD,

and the Department of Justice to coordinate efforts. This multi-year, interagency program aims to support the three d's—diplomacy, defense, and development—by coordinating efforts across agencies and with local partner countries to combat regional threats of violent extremism. The purpose of this whole-of-government approach is to build a long-term counterterrorism capability to bolster the ability of marginalized communities to resist radicalization and violent extremism. In that capacity, the TSCTP trains and equips security forces, but in addition to supporting efforts to limit radicalization of vulnerable populations. These programs aim to enhance youth employment, strengthen governance capacity, provide development infrastructure, and improve health and educational services.

Over the years, the TSCTP has counted both successes and shortcomings. Noted TSCTP successes include Mauritania's ability to "find, fix, and finish" Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), Chad's U.S.-trained force to clear Northern Mali of al-Qaeda operatives in 2013; the vocational training of Tuareg youth returning to Niger from Libya; and Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Mauritania's ability to bolster their border security. The program has also faced challenges in implementation as highlighted by a Center for Naval Analysis report, a finding consistent with interviews the authors conducted for this paper.²⁷ The report and other works underscore the resulting challenges: bureaucratic stovepipes, regional animosities, disruptions in engagement, and lack of a shared threat perception with partner nations. Many of the TSCTP's shortcomings stem from the same factors that have resulted, if unintentionally, in a reliance on kinetic response, such as unclear metrics by which to evaluate the success of counterterrorism policies as well as public and institutional pressures to do more.

While clear, substantive, and context-specific metrics can contribute to the success of counterterrorism programs, externalities and institutional pressures can result in the use of military responses at the expense of more comprehensive solutions. A 2012 military coup in Mali, resulting from the spread of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in addition to a Tuareg insurgency, basically brought U.S.-trained military leaders to power in an anti-democratic fashion; the French military intervened to stabilize the situation. The French intervention came about because of competing U.S. institutional aims and interests. As one U.S. government official claims, the State Department objected to the Department of Defense's military training because of Mali's human rights record. The situation caught some by surprise because, according to a U.S. official, the U.S.-trained Malians repeated what U.S. forces on the ground wanted to hear and, in the end, were not interested in combatting the necessary problems in the north against AQIM and the Tuareg.²⁸ Thus, the only effort that stopped AQIM was a French intervention. Overall, the lesson was that although the United States started out with the right idea in Mali, kinetic power from a non-U.S. source was used to resolve a crisis due to internal and external factors.

The program in Mali, designed to prevent the spread of AQIM, highlights the importance of developing meaningful metrics that are consistent with strategy and that also incorporate regional expertise and knowledge while aligning the capabilities of each agency involved. The Mali case also illustrates the role that externalities can play in executing counterterrorism policies and programs—in this case, a coup—underlying extremism, governance challenges, and activities by allies that the United States does not control. These challenges are, in fact, fairly consistent with those outlined in an earlier General Accounting Office (GAO) 2008 study, highlighting that the program lacked a clear definition of its goals and objectives, a clear delineation of the roles and missions of interagency stakeholders, the development of indicators that measure program outputs and outcomes, and the identification of necessary resources to achieve the program’s goals.²⁹ To be clear, the criticism is not that the program should not have been pursued. Rather, the point is to learn from this important case in developing future policies.

A Way Forward

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the illogic of current U.S. counterterrorism policies and the environment that makes kinetic action the default strategy; to be more successful, the Trump administration should take steps toward recalibrating U.S. policy. This paper has argued that three main factors have made kinetic activity the default option. First, there is no clear, substantive definition of what constitutes a counterterrorism success or failure. Second, public opinion and institutional politics demand policies that require immediate, visible results, subsequently discouraging policies that require long-term investment. Third is the lack of a viable deterrence policy. These factors have made kinetic action a strategy instead of a tactic and have hindered meaningful discussion about the prioritization of U.S. national security threats and an understanding of the threat that IS poses in comparison to other national security threats, severely limiting the United States’ ability to employ further-reaching, longer-term policies. The problem with an overreliance on kinetic activity is that it has the potential to undermine the larger counterterror effort and often does not result in degrading terrorist organizations, even if it aligns both with public opinion and current institutional capacities.

Overly relying on kinetic activity has the potential to undermine the larger counterterror effort.

The United States needs an alternative to counterterrorism policies that rely primarily and overwhelmingly on kinetic responses—too much of the conversation in the United States is framed in terms of “boots-

on-the-ground.” To cite retired General Stanley McChrystal, at the time ISAF Commander, “new resources are not the crux . . . Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent troops; our objective must be the population.”³⁰ Yet, the military option is often the “go-to” in developing a response to an extremely complicated problem that requires a multifaceted strategy. When faced with uncertainty about how to fight IS or al-Qaeda, the United States knows how to conduct direct kinetic operations successfully, which are observable and signal to the public that the government is indeed fighting against terrorism. In contrast, long-term policies require resources that are not easy to acquire or do not have immediate return on their investment and are therefore disincentivized. In situations in which there is little agreement on who should pay for the non-kinetic policies, the default focal point for interagency cooperation is kinetic.

We must change these patterns. A successful counterterrorism strategy requires clear, substantive goals and appropriate measures through which to evaluate those objectives, rather than metrics that satisfy largely domestic, popular perceptions. These objectives can be assessed in a number of different ways, though neither policymakers nor scholars have agreed upon the best ones. Terrorist groups can collapse, experience a decline in activity, have a shortened lifespan, control less territory, or acquire fewer recruits. If success is defined, for example, as eradicating enemy combatants or any individual suspected of being a terrorist, it is understandable how the kinetic option can seem inevitable. This lack of understanding over how to degrade and defeat terrorist organizations is a problem for governments trying to develop strategies to counter terrorist groups and for scholars trying to assess and understand the causes and solutions. More metrics alone is not the answer. It is critical to utilize measures that are specific to each case.

There are robust and whole-of-government programs that attempt to deal with other aspects of combating terrorism, but they are often dismissed, underfunded, or critiqued for not producing immediate results. These might include locally tailored counter-radicalization programs and de-radicalization programs, development assistance, public diplomacy, and civil society assistance. What is striking is that many government officials acknowledge this conundrum and see no easy way out. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the American public will accept and support these types of policies.

But a focus on governance and capacity-building efforts will help. These programs, many of them already established, may not produce the immediate results that the public demands in the aftermath of an attack on allies or the homeland or after a prolonged conflict, like Afghanistan. If they are tied to regional stabilization and prevent our regional state and non-state adversaries from undermining our national security interests, there is a fighting chance.

Furthermore, it is imperative the U.S. leadership is clear about two things: terrorism cannot be defeated overnight, and it may never be eradicated completely.

This is a challenging thing to say during an election year, but the hope is that the new administration will take this to heart. In addition, there needs to be clear, substantive measures of successes and failures at the mission level and also at the level of each agency involved. Better coordination and funding for non-kinetic activities is a priority so that the kinetic option is not always the focal point for institutional cooperation.

The policy implications for the Trump administration are clear: If something is not done to change this pattern, the United States may continue to apply suboptimal strategies that could result in the weakening of U.S. power and greater loss of American lives. Kinetic options are not the only, or even the primary, answer to countering terrorism.

Terrorism cannot be defeated overnight, and it may never be eradicated completely.

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