Counter-terrorism via counter-proliferation

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Do counter-proliferation policies help or hinder efforts at stopping terrorists from using chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological (CBNR) weapons? Counter-proliferation bounds the terrorist threat by reducing the vulnerability of US forces, allied military units and even civilian populations to terrorist attack. It helps to deter state-sponsored terrorism by bolstering the ability of US forces to retaliate with massive conventional force or with nuclear weapons. Counter-proliferation also probably helps to deter state-sponsored CBNR terrorism, although it has little effect on individual terrorists or independent terrorist networks. It reduces the prospects of terrorist incidents by helping to keep ‘surplus’ materials or weapons from entering black markets. Because counter-proliferation policies harden US or allied forces to terrorist attacks, however, counter-proliferation efforts might channel terrorists toward softer (civilian) targets.

Does US counter-proliferation policy or the concept of counter-proliferation help prevent terrorists from launching chemical, biological, nuclear or radiological attacks? Is there a relationship between US counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism policies?

The answers to these questions are not at all obvious. Counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism cut across existing conceptual, policy and organizational boundaries. Identifying relationships between counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation thus represents a research question of immediate theoretical and policy significance, especially since some analysts believe that terrorists want to arm themselves with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

Serious technical and operational obstacles will limit the ability of terrorists to employ radiological, chemical or biological weapons to generate mass casualties and a classic social science debate exists about whether preparing for the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by terrorists is worth the opportunity costs involved. But the destruction of the World Trade Center demonstrates that mass casualty terrorism has arrived. CBNR weapons might be increasingly attractive to terrorist groups, especially if they want to launch attacks that replicate or top the level of death and destruction that was achieved on September 11, 2001.

Both officials and theorists treat counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism as separate issues. Counter-proliferation largely deals with the
struggle between those militaries or sovereign states that want to acquire, threaten to use or actually employ chemical, biological or nuclear weapons to achieve political or military objectives, and those that want to stop them. Counter-terrorism is a term generally used to describe the efforts of states against non-state actors (criminal organizations, separatist groups, fanatics, etc.) that intend or try to use violence against civilian targets to achieve political objectives or to create death and destruction for ideological or millenarian reasons.

This theoretical and policy compartmentalization is in turn reflected by the division of responsibility for counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation among competing organizations within the US government, although it is too early to tell if and how the new homeland defense organization and anti-terrorist initiatives launched in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks will integrate these responsibilities.

The intelligence community, police agencies and special operations units are generally concerned with preventing or responding to terrorist attacks against US interests at home or abroad. By contrast, counter-proliferation is a Department of Defense (DoD) activity that is intended to eliminate or contain the threat posed by WMD primarily to US military forces. Recent efforts to evaluate the WMD threat treat US counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation policy as separate topics, although the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), redrafted in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, highlights the relationship between DoD and the newly created Office of Homeland Security.

Even though theoretical concepts and bureaucratic preferences can explain why no one has asked how counter-proliferation contributes to or detracts from counter-terrorism efforts, it is equally clear that no good logical or empirical reason emerges to dismiss the issue out of hand. In its December 1999 report to President Clinton, for example, the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, chaired by James Gilmore (hereafter referred to as the Gilmore report), offered judgments about the nature of the terrorist threat. These judgements were based on the presence of an effective US counter-proliferation capability, although Gilmore and his colleagues failed to note specifically the way counter-proliferation helped to constrain the terrorist threat.

Theory, policy and organization have blinded us to the way that US counter-proliferation efforts help to deter or prevent chemical, biological and nuclear terrorism. Common cognitive biases also have slowed widespread recognition of the negative interaction between counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism policies and of the tradeoffs that might have to be made between these two policies. Individuals often find it
difficult to recognize the opportunity costs and unintended consequences produced by the policies they advocate and adopt. They also find it difficult to see how well-intentioned policies can produce negative consequences.\(^7\)

Counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism are related in at least four ways.\(^8\) First, counter-proliferation policy has bounded the terrorist threat by cutting supplies to black markets and by reducing the incentives for state sponsorship of WMD terrorism. Second, superior US conventional military capabilities, which are bolstered in several ways by counter-proliferation policies, force determined US adversaries to seek asymmetric responses, including terrorism. To the extent that counter-proliferation policies harden US military units and installations to terrorist attack, counter-proliferation also might channel terrorists toward civilian targets.

Third, US counter-proliferation efforts address key allied vulnerabilities to terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction, further bounding the terrorist threat. Fourth, potential policy and budgetary tradeoffs are looming between counter-proliferation and a major component of counter-terrorism policy, consequence management (the protection of civilian populations from weapons effects following a successful terrorist attack).

The increase in homeland defense efforts following the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon will only exacerbate the need for tradeoffs between counter-proliferation and consequence management. This article explores each of these claims and then concludes by offering some observations about the relationship between counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism.

Counter-proliferation and the Limits of State-Sponsored Terrorism

Current US counter-proliferation policy reflects the guidance laid out in the May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which estimated that chemical or biological weapons were likely to be used in future conflicts.\(^9\) The 1997 QDR called upon the Defense Department to undertake two initiatives in response to this threat estimate. First, the Defense Department was to institutionalize counter-proliferation by using the concept as an organizing principle in every facet of military activity. US forces were to prepare to operate in a WMD environment. Second, Defense was instructed to ‘internationalize’ counter-proliferation to encourage allies and potential coalition partners to train, equip and prepare their forces to operate alongside US units in a nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare environment.\(^9\) Counter-proliferation is a multifaceted enterprise that embodies DoD efforts to reduce and counter the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction.

Counter-proliferation addresses the ‘supply-side’ of the WMD issue by reducing the availability of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons that
might find their way into the hands of terrorists. Arms control and nonproliferation efforts are an important part of counter-proliferation because they can be used to constrain, roll back, or even prevent states from acquiring unconventional weapons.

The Cooperative Threat Reduction program reduces the latent threat posed by Soviet ‘legacy’ systems. By properly disposing of weapons that are no longer needed, counter-proliferation helps keep obsolete munitions and materials from falling into hostile hands. Similarly, US export controls help to reduce the possibility that irresponsible or aggressive groups or states will acquire weapons of mass destruction and associated technologies. International norms against trafficking of dangerous materials or weapons help prevent dual-use technologies from reaching black markets and terrorists.

Counter-proliferation also embodies Defense Department efforts to counter existing WMD capabilities by: (1) deterring the use of WMD against US interests by denying adversaries their political or military objectives; (2) defending US and allied forces and populations from missile attack; (3) sustaining offensive and defensive military operations in a WMD environment; and (4) preparing for chemical, biological or nuclear use against US and allied civilians.

By making military forces a less vulnerable target and by guaranteeing that any use or prospective use of WMD will be preempted or met with prompt retaliation, US counter-proliferation policy reduces the threat of state-sponsored WMD terrorism. In other words, because counter-proliferation helps to insure that US forces can retaliate after military units or civilian targets suffer a WMD attack, American policy makers can make credible deterrent threats that discourage state-sponsored terrorism.

Counter-proliferation efforts ‘bound’ the terrorist threat by reducing the incentives for state-sponsored WMD terrorism and by limiting the opportunities for states to transfer materials and technologies to non-state actors to construct and use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Counter-proliferation is an *ex ante* and costly indicator (witness the financial and psychological costs of anthrax vaccination alone) of US resolve that bolsters general deterrence.11

The assumption that US deterrent threats are credible is a cornerstone of the Gilmore report, which dismisses the prospect of state-sponsored nuclear, chemical or biological terrorism as extremely unlikely. According to Gilmore, the threat of US conventional preemption – here the 1998 cruise missile attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan comes to mind – or nuclear retaliation in the aftermath of a mass casualty terrorist incident creates enormous disincentives for states to become involved in terrorism.12
These disincentives apparently are clear even to so-called ‘rogue states’: despite accesses to nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, no state has put its unconventional arsenal at the disposal of terrorists, although it is too early to tell if the anthrax attacks suffered in the United States in October 2001 has a link to a state sponsor.13 The benefits of even a successful state-sponsored terrorist attack against US forces might be short-lived. US forces are preparing to operate effectively in the wake of a WMD attack; terrorism directed against US military units should only prove to be a limited setback on the battlefield. The price for this temporary setback, however, could be severe retaliation once the sponsor of a terrorist attack has been identified.

Deterrent threats strengthened by counter-proliferation, however, would be less effective if they were directed at terrorists that lack state sponsors. Independent terrorists probably would expect to avoid symmetrical retaliation. They also might hope to escape discovery. If discovered, they might pose an inappropriate target for retaliation. Indeed, if terrorists embraced a millenarian philosophy or objective, they might even welcome severe retaliation.14 The objectives of the Heaven’s Gate cult, for example, were literally suicidal.

**Terrorism as an Asymmetric Threat**

To the extent that counter-proliferation policies provide escalation dominance on the battlefield, they help limit conflict to the conventional level of combat, a level where US forces have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to overwhelm adversaries. This escalation dominance also enhances US deterrent threats, which reduce incentives for states to sponsor terrorist activities.

But counter-proliferation, combined with US dominance of the conventional battlefield, could produce an unwelcome paradox: counter-proliferation might increase the likelihood of WMD terrorism by forcing adversaries to find asymmetric responses to US conventional superiority.15 As David Kay notes in his assessment of the terrorist challenge, ‘nations will seek courses of action that will allow them operational freedom from US conventional attack or, at least, the ability to inflict significant losses on the United States if it does attempt to frustrate their ambitions and military actions’.16 Terrorism supplies an asymmetric response to US dominance of conventional battle, although likely US adversaries would never want to take credit for a successful terrorist attack.

Because counter-proliferation also channels terrorist attacks away from relatively hard military targets, terrorists might find it easier to direct chemical or biological attacks against civilian, transportation or industrial targets that would have an impact on the course of conventional battle. In
other words, counter-proliferation channels attacks away from well-prepared military units towards relatively unprepared civilian or logistical targets.

History, theory and recent events appear to undermine this claim about the effect of counter-proliferation policy. Ideology, technology and political objectives, not just vulnerabilities, have shaped the four distinct waves of terrorist activity that have emerged over the last century. Recent history also suggests that the ongoing fourth wave of ‘sacred terrorism’ focuses on military or government targets.17 Attacks against the US Marines deployed in Lebanon in 1983, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the October 2000 attack against the USS Cole, and the September 11 attack against the Pentagon demonstrate that US military and government installations and units are the terrorist targets.

Although they do not provide blanket protection from terrorism, US forces employ tactics and equipment that reduce their vulnerability to WMD terrorist attacks. US military personnel are equipped with personal and collective protective equipment (suits, masks and shelters). Units are also equipped with point and standoff chemical and biological agent detectors that can reduce exposure to these hazards by warning of their presence in the environment. Decontamination equipment and medical countermeasures (vaccines and antidotes) also reduce the potential damage that might be inflicted by chemical and biological agents on US forces.

US military forces are more accessible to terrorist attack because they are forward deployed and often operate in chaotic environments. But, because of extensive defensive preparations, forward-deployed forces are not a particularly lucrative target for terrorists armed with chemical or biological weapons. US military units have the equipment and training needed to mitigate the impact of a WMD terrorist incident, pushing terrorists to find more lucrative (vulnerable) targets.

**Counter-proliferation and Coalition Warfare**

If American units find themselves in high-intensity conventional combat, they probably will be participating in an international coalition. Coalition warfare is important to the US because it demonstrates the overwhelming political commitment of the United States and the international community to stop aggression and egregious abuses of human rights. Coalitions, however, can be politically fragile. Opponents often attack an alliance by destroying its political cohesion, demonstrating to alliance members the unavoidable fact that the risks and benefits of warfare are not shared equally among the members of the coalition.

Indeed, this was Saddam Hussein’s intent during the Gulf War when Iraq attacked Israeli cities using SCUD missiles. Unable to stop the Gulf War
coalition militarily, Saddam sought to stop it politically by attempting to turn the war into an Arab-Israeli dispute, not a battle to end Iraqi aggression. If allied populations and militaries are vulnerable to state and non-state WMD terrorism, US-led coalitions might find themselves increasingly vulnerable to terrorist blackmail. Because counter-proliferation efforts have reduced the impact that WMD terrorism might have on forward-deployed US units, allied populations and militaries could be viewed as appropriate targets within easy reach of terrorist groups. By showing that allied governments are unable to protect their citizens, terrorism could undermine allied support for coalition operations by undermining popular support of allied governments themselves. The possibility that asymmetric responses might occur to US conventional superiority and the logic of coalition warfare coincide to identify allied military forces and populations as a tempting target for terrorist attacks.

Counter-proliferation further bounds the terrorist threat by hardening allied military and civilian targets against terrorist attacks. International counter-proliferation and consequence management preparations are valuable counter-terrorism instruments. The United States has launched two major regional initiatives to improve the ability of forward-deployed US forces and local allies to respond to the threat posed by chemical, biological and nuclear terrorism.

On the Korean peninsula, for instance, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the South Korean Ministry of Defense have undertaken a series of initiatives to improve the ability of South Korean and US forces to deter and defend against weapons of mass destruction. US and South Korean officials also have opened a dialogue to facilitate counter-proliferation planning. As a result, combined military exercises now include nuclear, chemical and biological warfare scenarios. Additionally, the Koreans established a new Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons Defense Command in June 1999 and have included funding for improved protective and detection equipment in their 1999 defense budget.

The Defense Department also has launched a Southwest Asia Cooperative Defense initiative. The initiative is intended not only to improve the ability of US and coalition forces to operate in a CBW environment, but also to improve the ability of host nations to protect their populations and industry from chemical and biological weapons attacks. Already, extensive cooperation is planned in four areas: (1) Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence (C4I) and shared early warning; (2) active air and missile defense; (3) passive defense (force protection and sustainment of military operations following chemical or biological attack); and (4) consequence management.

As potential ‘front-line’ states, US friends and allies on the Korean peninsula and in Southwest Asia are particularly vulnerable to both state
Counter-proliferation vs. Consequence Management

Although US counter-proliferation policy has helped reduce the threat posed by state-sponsored WMD terrorism directed against US forces, allies and even civilians, it has done little to reduce the threat posed by non-state actors to the US population. According to the Gilmore report, this threat is real, although it has been mischaracterized. Gilmore and his colleagues believe that there is a high probability that a low-casualty event will occur in the United States involving some type of ‘mass casualty’ device.

Terrorists lacking state sponsors probably do not have the technical expertise, equipment and materials needed to construct or use nuclear, biological, chemical or radiological weapons to inflict casualties and destruction on a truly massive scale. Instead, Gilmore suggests that poisonings, agricultural sabotage or product tampering seem to be plausible activities for terrorist organizations, a prediction that may be coming to pass, especially if the October 2001 anthrax infections are linked to the Al-Qaeda network. Clearly, counter-proliferation can do little if anything to address this sort of activity.

If officials really do believe that non-state actors pose a serious WMD threat to the United States and that these individuals cannot be deterred, preempted or arrested before they strike, then significant material and personnel resources must be devoted to deal with the consequences of a WMD attack against civilians. ‘First-responders’ need to learn how to deal with chemical or biological weapons; without training and equipment, police, firefighters and paramedics actually can spread pathogens or toxins, thereby producing more casualties. Vaccines or antidotes need to be made available to contain disease outbreaks or to save the lives of people exposed to deadly agents. Military organizations, here the National Guard comes to mind, must equip, train and prepare to act rapidly to contain and reduce weapons effects in large urban areas. A whole new set of strategies, protocols, doctrines and tactics needs to be developed to counter the effects of terrorist attacks.

Viewed in isolation, consequence management is no small task. Further complicating matters is the fact that counter-proliferation and consequence management differ fundamentally. Counter-proliferation initiatives primarily involve military forces and are directed against threats located outside of the United States. Counter-proliferation is intended to deter or
prevent acts of state and even non-state sponsored terrorism before they occur. In contrast, consequence management is intended to limit the impact of a failure of counter-proliferation policy to prevent a WMD terrorist attack against civilians.

Counter-proliferation and consequence management policies will soon present policymakers with significant tradeoffs in terms of budgets, personnel, organizational structures and philosophies that govern the fight against WMD terrorism. So far, these tradeoffs have not received much attention from those involved in either counter-terrorism or counter-proliferation. But as the urgency to respond to the 2001 September terrorist attacks increases, lawmakers, government officials and military officers might confront several stark dilemmas.

First, throughout the twentieth century, US efforts to counter the effects of chemical or biological weapons have been undertaken with military units in mind. For example, troops likely to encounter biological weapons are vaccinated, but similar efforts to vaccinate entire populations would be enormously expensive and possibly counterproductive. Anti-toxins issued to soldiers are extraordinarily potent agents which could themselves create a public health hazard if issued in peacetime to American households. Military personnel are supplied with expensive equipment that requires extensive training for proper utilization.

It is unrealistic to believe, however, that average citizens can be equipped and trained in peacetime to the high standards needed to operate sophisticated chemical and biological weapons detection devices or to utilize protective equipment properly. In other words, equipment and techniques used to protect military formations and personnel cannot simply be given to fire departments to help protect a local population.

Second, although counter-proliferation initiatives can constrain non-state actors by drying up black markets in contraband materials and equipment or by deterring state support to terrorist groups, counter-proliferation policy is primarily directed against threats that can be identified in geographic terms, if not always by national origin. Counter-proliferation policy is intended to strengthen the capability of US forces to operate in a chemical, biological or nuclear environment, a setting which implies war between recognized national entities.

In this sense, counter-proliferation policy reflects the state-centric bias of America’s armed forces, which prepare to fight roughly similar units in opposing military organizations. Counter-proliferation policy only addresses non-state threats in a tertiary manner because it supports a US military that views non-state threats as a minor concern. Increased emphasis on consequence management thus reflects a fundamental shift in American defense priorities.
Third, to combat WMD terrorism better, consequence management and counter-proliferation policies must be better coordinated. But this coordination would have to occur at the weakest point in US security: at the bureaucratic and legal nexus between foreign and domestic policy. Further complicating matters is the fact that even though counter-proliferation is organized by DoD, the domestic response to terrorism is loosely organized. The Gilmore report noted, for example, that today the scope or severity of an incident involving a chemical, biological or nuclear weapon would determine which (local, state, federal) agency would take the lead in responding to a terrorist incident.21

Terrorism cuts across national, bureaucratic and jurisdictional borders, but the American effort to stop terrorism has a long way to go before it too is a seamless enterprise. One can only hope that the new Homeland Defense Organization can respond effectively to this challenge.

Conclusion

Counter-proliferation contributes to counter-terrorism in several significant ways. It bounds the terrorist threat by reducing the vulnerability of US forces, allied military units and even civilian populations to terrorist attack. It helps to deter state-sponsored terrorism by bolstering the ability of US forces to retaliate with massive conventional force or with nuclear weapons. Although leaders that possess chemical, biological or even nuclear devices might find common cause with some terrorist group, they apparently have no desire to have their state linked to a terrorist attack involving unconventional weapons. Counter-proliferation also reduces the prospects of terrorist incidents by helping to keep ‘surplus’ materials or weapons from entering black markets. Officials or analysts rarely mention these positive contributions because counter-proliferation is not intended to address the terrorist threat, although on occasion (for example, the Gilmore report) they are factored into intelligence assessments or strategic calculations.

Counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism also are linked in less desirable ways. The dominance of US conventional forces compels antagonists to seek asymmetric responses to American superiority on the battlefield. To the extent that counter-proliferation bolsters this conventional superiority by providing escalation dominance, it might channel an enemy’s response to available targets (such as terrorist attacks against civilians). Similarly, counter-proliferation policies that harden US or allied forces to terrorist attack might channel terrorists toward softer (civilian) targets. Unlike the positive contributions made by counter-proliferation policy, officials and analysts are highly aware of the possibility that opponents might use asymmetric attacks to respond to US conventional
superiority. Concern about asymmetric attacks helps to blind observers to
the ways counter-proliferation bounds the terrorist threat.

The relationship between counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism,
however, is based on more than cognitive biases – risk averse officials and
analysts could be expected to be more aware of potential losses (domestic
terrorism) than existing gains (reduced threats against forward-deployed
military units). If fear of domestic terrorism continues to grow, significant
budgetary tradeoffs between counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation
might be looming on the horizon. These tradeoffs cannot be avoided
because many counter-proliferation initiatives simply cannot be used to
help in consequence management.

Counter-proliferation is intended to help military units in battle against
relatively symmetrical state-sponsored military forces, while consequence
management closely resembles disaster management. Military units can
hope to defeat their opponents in battle, thereby avoiding the costs of defeat.
But disaster managers cannot defeat hurricanes; they can only take steps to
minimize the impact when disaster strikes. It is this difference in
fundamental objective that ultimately limits the possibility of simply
applying counter-proliferation capabilities in a counter-terrorism campaign,
and that will force policy makers to make difficult organizational and
budgetary choices in the years ahead.

NOTES
1. This article is based on a paper entitled ‘Antiterrorism via Counter-proliferation’ presented
at the USAF Institute of National Security Studies, 7th Annual Topical Conference, National
Defense University, 27–28 July 1999. I would like to thank Peter Lavoy, James Smith and
David C. Rapoport and an anonymous reviewer for their insights and advice.
(January/February 1998), pp.26–41. US officials have stated that members of the Al-Qaeda
(bin Laden network) have experimented with chemical weapons and have attempted to buy
nuclear ones. Kenneth Katzman, ‘Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors,
3. For eloquent statements of each side in this debate see David C. Rapoport, ‘Terrorism and
and David Kay ‘WMD Terrorism: Hype or Reality,’ in James M. Smith and William C.
Thomas (eds.), The Terrorism Threat and US Government Response: Operational and
Organizational Factors (USAF Institute of National Security Studies, Colorado Springs,
CO., 2001), pp.69–78.
4. In February 1994, the National Security Council defined counter-proliferation as ‘the
activities of the Department of Defense across the full range of US efforts to combat
proliferation, including diplomacy, arms control, export controls, and intelligence collection
and analysis with particular responsibility for assuring that US forces and interests can be
protected should they confront an adversary armed with weapons of mass destruction’. See
Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, Acquisition and Technology, Report on
Nonproliferation and Counter-proliferation Activities and Programs (Washington, DC:
5. For example, see David C. Rapoport, ‘Terrorism and Weapons of the Apocalypse,’ National
9. The 2001 QDR simply notes that the proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons continues, see 2001 QDR, p.12.