

Chapter Eight

Antiterrorism via Counterproliferation

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Does US counterproliferation policy or the concept of counterproliferation help prevent terrorists from launching chemical, biological, or nuclear attacks? Is there a relationship between US counterproliferation and antiterrorism policies? The answers to these questions are not at all obvious. Counterproliferation and antiterrorism cut across existing conceptual, policy and organizational boundaries. Identifying relationships between antiterrorism and counterproliferation thus represents a research question of immediate theoretical and policy significance, especially since some analysts believe that terrorists might increasingly be willing to arm themselves with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.¹

Both officials and theorists treat counterproliferation and antiterrorism as separate issues. Counterproliferation 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. Antiterrorism 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 antiterrorism and counterproliferation among competing organizations within the US government. 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, counterproliferation is a Department of Defense (DoD) activity that is intended to eliminate or contain the threat

posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) primarily to US military forces.² Recent efforts to evaluate the WMD threat continue to treat US terrorism and counterproliferation policy as separate topics.³

Even though theoretical concepts and bureaucratic preferences can explain why no one has asked how counterproliferation contributes to or detracts from antiterrorism efforts, it is equally clear that no good logical or empirical reason emerges to dismiss the issue out of hand. In their 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 counterproliferation capability, although Gilmore and his colleagues failed to note specifically the way counterproliferation helped to constrain the terrorist threat.⁴ Theory, policy, and organization have blinded us both to the way that US counterproliferation efforts help to deter or prevent chemical, biological, and nuclear terrorism and to the negative interaction between counterproliferation and antiterrorism policies.

Counterproliferation and antiterrorism are related in at least four ways.⁵ First, counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation policies, force determined US adversaries to seek asymmetric responses, including terrorism. To the extent that counterproliferation policies harden US military units and installations to terrorist attack, counterproliferation also might channel terrorists toward civilian targets. Third, US counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation and a major component of antiterrorism policy,

consequence management (the protection of civilian populations from weapons effects following a successful terrorist attack). The chapter explores each of these claims and then concludes by offering some observations about the relationship between counterproliferation and antiterrorism.

Counterproliferation and the Limits of State-Sponsored Terrorism

Current US counterproliferation 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. 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 counterproliferation 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” counterproliferation 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.⁶ Counterproliferation is a multifaceted enterprise that embodies DoD efforts to reduce and counter the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction.

Counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation 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, counterproliferation 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 in dangerous materials or

weapons help prevent dual-use technologies from reaching black markets and terrorists.

Counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation policy reduces the threat of state-sponsored WMD terrorism. In other words, because counterproliferation helps to insure that US forces can retaliate after military units or civilian targets suffer WMD attack, American policymakers can make credible deterrent threats that discourage state-sponsored terrorism.

Counterproliferation 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. Counterproliferation is an ex ante and costly indicator (witness the financial and psychological costs of anthrax vaccination alone) of US resolve that bolsters general deterrence.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 to American success 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 counterproliferation, 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.¹⁰ The objectives of the Heaven's Gate cult, for example, were literally suicidal.

Terrorism as an Asymmetric Threat

To the extent that counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation, combined with US dominance of the conventional battlefield, could produce an unwelcome paradox: counterproliferation might increase the likelihood of WMD terrorism by forcing adversaries to find asymmetric responses to US conventional superiority.¹¹ 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."¹² 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 counterproliferation also channels terrorist attacks away from relatively hard military targets, terrorists might find it easier to direct attacks against civilian, transportation, or industrial targets that would have an impact on the course of conventional battle. In other words, counterproliferation channels attacks away from well-prepared military units towards relatively unprepared civilian targets. 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 (e.g., suits, masks and shelters). Units also are 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. 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.

Another paradox produced by a successful counterproliferation policy is that concern about asymmetric warfare can heighten perceptions of a terrorist threat among the American public and policymakers alike. If US forces were expected to fare badly on some distant battlefield, then WMD terrorism would be considered “a lesser included threat,” a second-order problem unlikely to make an already bad situation worse. Because changing perceptions of threat can produce significant political, strategic and military consequences, counterproliferation policies that increase the effectiveness of US military forces can actually make Americans feel less secure when it comes to WMD terrorism. Many observers probably underestimate the American response to WMD terrorism.¹³ But by influencing *ex ante*

perceptions that terrorism is a likely asymmetric response to US conventional superiority, counterproliferation could foster an element of self-deterrence in American strategy. Because the need to develop an asymmetric response to US conventional superiority is a plausible motivation for WMD terrorism, US policymakers might become extremely reluctant to intervene in a regional crisis. In other words, we might scare ourselves silly.

Counterproliferation 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 an extraordinarily powerful weapon in the US arsenal because it demonstrates the overwhelming political commitment of the United States and the international community to stop aggression and other particularly 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 publics and militaries are vulnerable to state and non-state WMD terrorism, US-led coalitions might find themselves increasingly vulnerable to terrorist blackmail. Because counterproliferation efforts have reduced the impact that WMD terrorism might have on forward-deployed US units, allied publics 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.¹⁴ 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 attack.

Counterproliferation further bounds the terrorist threat by hardening allied military and civilian targets against terrorist attack. International counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation 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.¹⁵

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 host nations' abilities to protect population and industry from chemical and biological weapons attack. Already, extensive cooperation is planned in four areas: (1) 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.¹⁶

As potential "front line" states, US friends and allies on the Korean peninsula and in Southwest Asia are particularly vulnerable to both state and non-state sponsored acts of terrorism. Although the initiatives currently underway do not completely eliminate the threat posed by WMD terrorism

especially to the civilian populations of America's allies, they are a logical first step in closing off a "window of opportunity" for terrorists.

Counterproliferation vs. Consequence Management

Although US counterproliferation 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. Clearly, counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation and consequence management differ fundamentally. Counterproliferation initiatives primarily involve military forces and are directed against threats located outside of the United States. Counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation policy to prevent a WMD terrorist attack against civilians.

Counterproliferation 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 antiterrorism or counterproliferation. But if the terrorist threat increases, lawmakers, government officials, and military officers might confront several stark dilemmas.

First, throughout this 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 that 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 counterproliferation initiatives can constrain non-state actors by drying up black markets in contraband materials and equipment or in deterring state support to terrorist groups, counterproliferation policy is primarily directed against threats that can be identified in geographic terms, if not always by national origin. Counterproliferation policy is intended to strengthen the capability of US forces to operate in a chemical, biological, or nuclear environment, a setting that implies war between recognized national entities. In this sense, counterproliferation policy reflects the state-centric bias of America's armed forces, which prepare to fight roughly similar units in opposing military organizations. Counterproliferation 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 better combat WMD terrorism, consequence management and counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation 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.¹⁷ 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.

Conclusion

Counterproliferation contributes to antiterrorism in several significant ways. It bounds the terrorist threat by reducing the vulnerability of US forces, allied military units, and even allied publics 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. Counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation is not intended to address the terrorist threat, although on occasion (e.g., the Gilmore report) they are factored into intelligence assessments or strategic calculations.

Counterproliferation and antiterrorism 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 counterproliferation bolsters this conventional superiority by providing escalation dominance, it might channel an enemy’s response to available targets (e.g., terrorist attacks against civilians). Similarly, counterproliferation policies that harden US or allied forces to terrorist attack might channel terrorists toward softer (civilian) targets. Unlike the positive contributions made by counterproliferation 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 counterproliferation bounds the terrorist threat.

The relationship between counterproliferation and antiterrorism, 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 antiterrorism and counterproliferation might be looming on the horizon. These tradeoffs cannot be avoided because many counterproliferation initiatives simply cannot be used to help in consequence management. Counterproliferation 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 for themselves. 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 counterproliferation capabilities in an antiterrorism campaign, and that will force policymakers to make difficult organizational and budgetary choices in the years ahead.

¹ Richard Betts, "The New Threat of Mass Destruction," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 77, No. 1 (January/February 1998), 26-41.

² In February 1994, the National Security Council defined counterproliferation 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 Counterproliferation Activities and Programs (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1994), 1.

³ For example, see David C. Rapoport, "Terrorism and Weapons of the Apocalypse," *National Security Studies Quarterly* Vol. V. No. 3 (Summer 1999), 49-67; and Ashton B. Carter and Celeste Johnson, "Beyond the Counterproliferation Initiative to a 'Revolution in Counterproliferation Affairs,'" *National Security Studies Quarterly* Vol. V. No. 3 (Summer 1999), 83-90.

⁴ Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities For Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, "Assessing the Threat," 15 December 1999.

⁵ Similarly, analysts have claimed that the bureaucratic division of labor between US nonproliferation and counterproliferation efforts protects organizational bailiwicks, but undermines policy coherence. See Brian Bates and Chris McHorney, *Counterproliferation in the 21st Century* (Lewiston, NY: the Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

⁶ William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997. [Http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr/sec7.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr/sec7.html)

⁷ James D. Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 1994), 236-269.

⁸ "Assessing the Threat," 17-18.

⁹ Seth Carus, *Bioterrorism and Biocrimes: The Illicit Use of Biological Agents in the 20th Century* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Counterproliferation Research, National Defense University, March 1999), 37.

¹⁰ William C. Martel, "Deterrence and Alternative Images of Nuclear Possession," in T.V. Paul, Richard Harknett and James J. Wirtz, (eds.), *The Absolute Weapon Revisited: Nuclear Arms and the Emerging International Order* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 213-234; and Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1996), 24-36.

¹¹ On this point see Jonathan Tucker, "Asymmetric Warfare," *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 1999), 32-38.

¹² See Kay's chapter this volume.

¹³ Joseph F. Pilat, "Apocalypse Now – or Never?" *Survival* Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter 1998-1999), 174.

¹⁴ Peter Chalk, *West European Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, The Evolving Dynamic* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 13; and Bruce Hoffmann, *Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Analysis of Trends and Motivations* (Santa Monica: RAND P-8039, 1999), 53-54.

¹⁵ Peter R. Lavoy, "Antiterrorism via Counterproliferation," presentation delivered to USAF Institute of National Security Studies 7th Annual Topical Conference, "Twenty-First Century Terrorism and US National Security," National Defense University, Washington, D.C., 27-28 July 1999.

¹⁶ Peter R. Lavoy, "Cooperative Defense Against Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Arabian Gulf," in Jacquelyn K. Davis, Charles M. Perry, and Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi (eds.), *Air/Missile Defense, Counterproliferation and Security Policy Planning* (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1999), 51-57.

¹⁷ "Assessing the Threat," 61-62.