

# The Best Defence is a Terrific Offence: Four Approaches to Countering Modern Terrorism

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Fighting global terrorism has become this decade's dominant international struggle. In the six short years since the 2001 attacks, the political and military landscape – internationally and domestically – has evolved in manners that markedly differentiate the pre- and post-9/11 eras.

Internationally, novel, ad-hoc global alliances have been formed. Pakistan, for instance, has become the United State's "most important non-NATO ally" – a veritable quantum leap from the time it spent chastised as a global pariah. Cooperative military arrangements have also been sought between NATO allies and Jordan, Uzbekistan, the Philippines, Kenya, Ethiopia, and a number of other less traditional partners. In like manner, 9/11 helped replace the rogue states of yesteryears – Libya and Cuba – with new ones – Syria, Sudan, and Iran. Finally, states grown unaccustomed to fighting pitched military battles have begun to do so. The Canadian military, to say nothing of Australia's, Poland's, and the Netherlands', is today involved in its fiercest campaign since the Korean War, fighting an intransigent enemy in the sands of Afghanistan.

Domestically, a number of security initiatives have also been developed since 2001. Consider, for

instance, the replacement of the "world's longest undefended border" between the United States and Canada with the world's first "virtual fence". The Secure Border Initiative Net (SBINet) is expected to comprise a chain of nearly 2000 towers – each 80 metres high – equipped with motion, sound, and infrared detectors, cameras, and radiation sensors able to track and relay information on would-be border-crossing terrorists. In similar fashion, multinational foreign intelligence sharing has also reached new levels, while civil-military counter-terrorism initiatives – best encapsulated in the multilateral and inter-agency Top Official (TOPOFF) WMD Simulation Exercises – have been developed and honed. Most industrialized states have also constructed departments of 'Homeland Defence', augmenting national coordination in the domestic fight against terrorism. Developments in societal monitoring and personal, biometric identification have followed suit. In the United Kingdom, for instance, 5 million closed circuit televisions (CCTVs) monitor an individual's day-to-day business hundreds of time a day.

Evidently, modern counter-terrorism has evolved to include two diverging – though related – initiatives: an international and predominantly military strategy

that combats terrorism offensively; and a domestic civil-political initiative that mitigates and denies terrorism's impact through defensive preparedness.

While both offensive and defensive counter-terror strategies will prove to be necessary components of any Canadian response to combating global terrorism, the evolving international security environment requires that we place emphasis on the former. Contrary to the oft-repeated and increasingly inane notion that terrorism cannot be defeated by force, this article suggests that several offensive-oriented counter-terrorism tactics can be used effectively to combat and defeat terrorism.

### *The Threat of Modern Terrorism*

The evolving security environment is marked by four inter-related developments. None of these, by themselves, are really new to the global arena, but their combined impact is. Together, they coalesce in ways that will make the future international system both ripe for – and dangerously susceptible to – catastrophic terrorism.

First, globalization – the nebulous force that binds independent actors more closely to one another – continues unabated. While increased globalization may make the rest of 'them' look and act a lot more like 'us', politically, economically, even culturally speaking, globalization also bears dangerous side-effects. The phenomenon has, for instance, given life to non-traditional forms of violence. While traditional conceptions of political behaviour suggest that the state has a monopoly over organized violence, globalization has given non-state networks the ability to harness unprecedented amounts of coercive power.<sup>1</sup> While 9/11 did not create this new avenue of informal violence, the attack did highlight its destructive potential.

Globalization also increases the vulnerability of industrialized societies to small, well-timed, and well-positioned acts of terror. In a global order where

<sup>1</sup> Robert Keohane, "The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and the "Liberalism of Fear", *Social Science Research Council*, (2002), <<http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/keohane2.htm>>, (Accessed May 15, 2007), 2.

societies, economies, and political institutions are connected to one another by way of a thick web of interdependence, pinpoint attacks have the potential of reverberating disproportionately through the system. If 9/11 devastated the global airline and tourist industries, think of the global damage *Bonjika II* (the foiled 2006 plot to destroy up to a dozen airplanes in mid-flight over the Atlantic Ocean with 'liquid bombs') would have caused. Regionally, a similar story is being played out. Al Qaeda's attacks on various Red Sea tourist resorts in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula have had the intended effect of virtually eliminating tourist dollars. Al Qaeda's deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, reiterated the role of economic terrorism, stating, in a 2006 audio tape, the need for followers to "inflict losses on the crusader West, especially to its economic infrastructure with strikes that would make it bleed for years."<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, oil refineries have been targeted in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and elsewhere and tourist hotspots have been hit in Israel, Jordan, Kenya, and Indonesia in a related attempt to impact interdependent economies.

The thesis that globalization results in risky interdependence is well iterated by Thomas Homer-Dixon, who argues that modern terrorism "operates like jujitsu – redirect[ing] the energies of our intricate societies against us."<sup>3</sup> The more complicated our political, social, and economic systems become, the greater the consequence of a limited though exact terrorist attack. In one sense, then, terrorism isn't the new variable; our vulnerability to it is.

A second feature of the evolving security paradigm involves the effect of continued scientific and technological innovation. Think of the likely advances that await us in information technology, robotics, and nano- and bio-technologies. Think also, however, to the darker side of technological development. Indeed, every breakthrough has a

<sup>2</sup> Firouz Sedarat, "Al Qaeda's Zawahri Calls for Strikes against West", *Reuters*, (March 4, 2006), <[http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/03/05/zawahri\\_calls\\_for\\_strikes\\_against\\_west/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/03/05/zawahri_calls_for_strikes_against_west/)>

<sup>3</sup> T. Homer-Dixon, "The Rise of Complex Terrorism", *Foreign Policy* (January 2002), pp 58. See also, T. Homer-Dixon, *The Ingenuity Gap: How Can We Solve the Problems of the Future?*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2000), Chapters 4, 7.

potentially malicious use, complicating the ‘arms race’ pitting terrorist against counter-terrorist. One man’s airplane – sadly enough – has proven another’s guided missile. Internet banking revolutionizes the way we pay our bills, but it also allows non-state actors to launder electronic money. Chlorine may be a necessary ingredient to a functioning hospital, but couple it to high explosives – as terrorists have begun doing on the streets of Najaf, Ramadi, and Baghdad – and it makes for a deadly dirty bomb. Cell phones are a necessity of any functioning economy, but hooking a phone’s ringer to a detonator – as terrorists did in the Hebrew University Blast of 2002, in the Madrid and Bali bombings, and elsewhere – and you’ve got ready made and cheap lethality. In each case, benign technological developments are employed by terrorists to kill civilians in novel and unexpected ways. This trend will continue in step with every future technological development.

A third feature of the evolving security environment will be the increasing prevalence of fragile, failing, and failed states. Due to myriad causes, political weakness in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Northern Africa, and elsewhere will become increasingly commonplace in the coming decades. In an international system developed on the principle of state sovereignty, a failed state is one that cannot control the inner-workings of its territorial entity. They are marked with a partial or substantial loss of governmental control over the territorial borders of a given political area, plagued, as it is, by a “collapse of authority of the central government.”<sup>4</sup> Besides the basic humanitarian issue associated with fragile political environments – think of Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti – ungovernable geographies of the future will represent strategic threats to Canada and her allies as potential hiding places for terrorist organizations. It took a failed Afghanistan only five years in the 1990s to metastasize from a humanitarian and human rights disaster into a clear and present terrorist threat as al Qaeda’s base of operations. The same could be said today of Somalia and the Islamic

<sup>4</sup> David Carment, “Effective Defence Policy for Responding to Failed and Failing States”, Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, Research Paper Series, (June 2005), 5. See also Robert I. Rotberg, “Failed States in a World of Terror”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81 (4), (July 2002).

Courts Union, of Southern Lebanon and Hezbollah, of Gaza and Hamas.<sup>5</sup> Tomorrow’s political power vacuum will be the fuel feeding well-funded, opportunistic, and predatory terror organizations.

Finally, non-state actors will continue to grow in significance over the coming decade, impacting the global security environment in new and uncertain ways. Non-state groups from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan to al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb in Northern Africa are today playing a more significant role in the world of organized violence than a majority of states. The 19 individuals who carried out the 9/11 attacks wore no discernable military uniforms, acted not as a military organization, represented no sanctioned government, carried no military hardware, made no distinction between civilian and military targets, and offered no warning of their attack and yet, in an act of coordinated violence killed more people and caused more economic, social, and political damage, than did the Japanese fleet at Pearl Harbor. While large scale attacks like 9/11 will continue to be rare, the rise of smaller-scale terror attacks – like those in Bali, Madrid, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Moscow, Mombassa, Casablanca, Beslan, Jakarta, Baghdad, Taba, Sharm el-Sheikh, Beirut, London, Aman, Dahab, Mumbai, Algiers, and so on and so forth – will continue. Terrorism is a global problem. Whether they like it or not, no state will very easily sit this fight out.

All in all, interdependence, technological development, political weakness, and non-state empowerment have coalesced in creating a global environment within which terrorist groups can organize more easily and function more freely and effectively. Well-funded, organized, and motivated terrorist organizations have tens of thousands of targets open to them and the means to attack them cheaply and effectively. Power stations, bus depots, air and seaports, subway stations, government buildings, schools, civilian skyscrapers, movie theatres, hockey stadiums, shopping malls – the list is literally infinite. As Steven David suggests, “It is impossible to defend them all, especially against an...adversary that can choose the time and place of

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Riedle, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007.

attack.”<sup>6</sup> Under such conditions, the best response is to go on the counter-offensive, eliminating the threat before it can be launched.

In a globalized international system, this will require global action. Unlike past decades in which domestic terror groups with local grievances demanded a “national counter-response”, modern international terrorism, as Paul Rich asserts, has entered “the arena of global strategy.”<sup>7</sup> While both the terrorism of the Cold War and the terrorism of today require coordination between security, military, intelligence, and law enforcement authorities, today’s response must also be internationalized.

As a result, the best counter-terror defence will prove to be a terrific international offence.

### ***Offensive Counter-Terrorism for the Modern Age***

Of the many offensive counter-terror strategies available to Canada and her allies, four tactics stand out.

First, states must employ a strategy of Forward Defence. It has become clear that under certain conditions of state failure, third party military intervention is required to eliminate terrorist infrastructure. The strategy is to wrest territorial integrity from terrorist organizations, crippling their infrastructural and operational abilities to plan, train for, and carry out acts of global terrorism.

This is an easily defensible offence-oriented strategy, having had its success against al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, against Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Southeast Asia by Philippino, Malaysian, Australian, and American forces since 2002, against Hezbollah following Israel’s incursion into Southern Lebanon in 2006, and against the Islamic Courts Union following Ethiopian (and American) interventions in Somalia in 2007. Forward Defence takes boots on the ground,

<sup>6</sup> Steven R. David, “Fatal Choices: Israel’s Policy of Targeted Killing”, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 51, (2002).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Rich, “Al Qaeda and the Radical Islamic Challenge to Western Strategy,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 14 (1), (2003), 40-41.

reliable intelligence, and the political will to act preemptively when required. We need to engage them over there, the saying goes, before we are forced to fight them over here.

Second, modern terrorism is part and parcel of what theory-wonks call Fourth Generation Warfare. Today’s enemy is stateless, militarily decentralized, organized as a network rather than a hierarchy, and non-nationally (but perhaps religiously) structured. In one sense, Fourth Generation Warfare represents the state’s loss of monopoly over coercive power, thrusting us all into an uncertain world of medieval warfare. This doesn’t mean, however, that governments are unable to go to war with terror networks, but rather that they must do so unconventionally. It will take a network to fight today’s netwar.

Many of today’s deadliest terrorist organizations, like al Qaeda, Jemmah Islamiah, Islamic Jihad, and others, are organized as networks. They have hydra-like nodes that function independently from each other and autonomously from a centrally located command and control structure. As John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation suggest, terrorist networks grasp “the value of attacking from multiple directions by dispersed small units [using a] swarm-like doctrine...of episodic, pulsing attacks.”<sup>8</sup> A netwar response, then, is an unconventional answer to unconventional warfare. It mimics the terrorists’ swarming abilities and unique operational organization by structuring military force along similar network – rather than hierarchal – lines.

In conducting modern counter-terrorism, states must deploy small units of special operation forces that are interconnected with other units in artillery, intelligence, reconnaissance, and aerial support, able to hunt and destroy terrorist nodes with careful and

<sup>8</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, “Fight Networks with Networks”, *RAND Review*, 25 (3), 2001, 18-19. See also, Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2004); Thomas Dempsey, “Counterterrorism in African Failed States: Challenges and Potential Solutions,” *Strategic Studies Institute: Monograph*, (April 2006), <[http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil./pdffiles/PU\\_B649.pdf](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil./pdffiles/PU_B649.pdf)> .

exact precision. In this way, Barry Cooper suggests, counter-netwar teams combine “tactical decentralization with coordination of dispersed units,” able to attack where they need to, when they need to, with the firepower they need to get the job done.<sup>9</sup> Just as a terrorist group’s power comes from its unique organizational structure and swarming ability (rather than its technological sophistication – which is negligible), modern military power must likewise evolve in operational, doctrinal, and organizational manners to fix emerging netwar asymmetries.<sup>10</sup> People forget, but when the Global War on Terror started in October 2001, fewer than 200 American soldiers, bundled in groups of 20 and linked to warplanes and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) circling the skies, dislodged the Taliban and al Qaeda from Afghanistan. Today’s war of attrition against terrorist organizations will demand less ‘shock and awe’ and more ‘hide and seek’.

Third, selectively targeting and killing terrorist leaders, operators, facilitators, bomb-makers, fundraisers, recruiters, and the like – while normatively, legally, and politically contentious – is proving a robust and prudent offensive strategy. Targeted killing is government-sanctioned slaying of specific individuals. While the thought of democratic governments sending soldier-spies to hunt and kill terrorists might strike some as repugnant, the tactic is nonetheless a given of modern counter-terrorism. Its use has had some success.

Consider Israel’s near elimination of Black September following the Munich Olympic Massacre of 1972; the targeted killing of Hezbollah leaders Ragheb Harb in 1984 and Abbas Musawi in 1992; the British SAS attack against three IRA terrorists in Gibraltar in 1988; the 1995 killing of Islamic Jihad leader, Fathi Shkaki, in Malta; the 1996 killing of Hamas’ bomb-maker Yahya Ayyash (a.k.a. “the engineer”) in Gaza; the targeted strike on Osama bin Laden in the American missile attack on al Qaeda’s

Afghan training camps in 1998; the decimation of al Qaeda’s leadership since 2001, including Muhammad Atef, killed in a Kabul air-strike in 2001, Abu Ali al-Harithi, killed by a remote-controlled CIA drone in Yemen in 2002, Hamza Rabia, killed by a guided missile in Pakistan in 2005, Abu Musab Zarqawi, killed by an American strike in Iraq, 2006; the joint Ethiopian-American strike against Abu Taha al Sudani, Fazul Mohammed, and others in Somalia in 2007; and the killing of Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban’s most senior leader, by a NATO-led operation in Afghanistan in May 2007.

The cumulative effect of targeted killing on a terrorist group’s operational ability is multifold.

For starters, constant elimination of leadership leaves a terrorist organization in general disarray – replacement takes time, power struggles are likely to develop, and existing command and control apparatuses becomes confused.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, targeted killing acts as a deterrent – not of the specific suicide terrorist *per se*, but of his handlers. “Behind every suicide bomber,” suggests Steven David, “are others who might not be as ready for martyrdom.”<sup>12</sup> Fear of sudden death is surely a motivator that can dissuade certain individuals.

For smaller terrorist groups or particular terrorist cells – where leadership, knowledge, and power is centralized – targeted elimination can have the dramatic effect of completely eliminating a specific menace.<sup>13</sup> The simple *threat* of assassination, too, forces leaders to look after their personal safety, hinders their freedom of movement, throws them off-balance, and diverts their time, energy, and resources towards taking precautionary measures rather than planning terrorist operations. Leaders in hiding face the related problem of “motivating their followers” – calling for members to brazenly carry out acts of

<sup>9</sup> Barry Cooper, “Unholy Terror: The Origin and Significance of Contemporary, Religious-based Terrorism”, *Fraser Institute Occasional Paper*, No. 1, (March 2002), 41.

<sup>10</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, “Osama bin Laden and the Advent of Netwar,” *New Perspective Quarterly*, Vol. 18 (4) (2001).

<sup>11</sup> Gal Luft, “The Logic of Israel’s Targeted Killing”, *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (1), Winter 2003.

<sup>12</sup> David, “Fatal Choices”, 7

<sup>13</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “Pre-Emptive Targeted Killings as a Counter-Terror Tool: An Assessment of Israel’s Approach”, *Washington Institute for Near East Studies*, (August 28, 2001).

terror from behind a ski mask is less effective than doing so openly from behind a podium.<sup>14</sup>

And finally, by eliminating the top echelons of a terrorist group – the engineers, trainers, forgers, recruiters, and so on – a policy of targeted killing has the related effect of ‘de-professionalizing’ an organization. By forcing the hasty replacement of important leadership positions with less-well-trained individuals, targeted killing makes a terrorist organization less effective. The number of skilled operators is limited, after all, so that while a group might remain able to attract recruits in the long term, its overall ability to inflict harm in the short term is altogether diminished. Evidence of a terror group’s de-professionalization is highlighted in the case of Hamas in the years between 2002 and 2005. While the terror organization carried out four times as many attacks on Israelis in 2005 than it did in 2002, its general effectiveness (measured, sadly, by the number of victim deaths) decreased by a similar factor. The attacks became altogether less successful. While other variables (the West Bank security barrier, Israeli mobilization, checkpoints, domestic vigilance, and Palestinian infighting) impacted Hamas’ efficiency, it appears, as Daniel Byman suggests, that the “drop-off occurred partly because [of] Israel’s targeted killings,” which “shattered” Hamas’ ability to train, equip, and send out the ‘best’ suicide bombers.<sup>15</sup> Only time will tell whether or not the targeted killing of al Qaeda’s leadership in Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, and Somalia has had a similar impact on its operational abilities, though recent counter-terrorist successes seem to indicate that the strategy has.

Fourth and finally, debate has re-surfaced on the value of an American-led multinational deterrent and containment policy against global terrorist groups and

their state sponsors. There are, theoretically speaking, similarities between the manner in which Cold War containment of the Soviet Bloc was constructed and how a comparable system of checks and balances might be established to contain modern terrorism. The approach rests principally on minimizing the power and influence of terrorist-enabling states. By targeting state sponsors of terror with threat of severe military coercion, by limiting their power over regional actors, by diminishing their economic sovereignty, and by pursuing other policies and actions that generally raise the costs of appeasing and condoning terrorism, the power and ability of terror networks themselves becomes limited.<sup>16</sup>

While a policy of deterrence and containment is, by its very nature, not strictly offensive – resting on the threat of coercion rather than on the use of coercion – its international construction requires a robust projection of military force. Containment is only viable when the military force required to back it up is clearly communicated and deemed viable by both the deterrer and deterred. Forward operating bases and military launching pads, like those used by American and Allied forces stationed in foreign bases in the Indian Ocean (Diego Garcia), Kirgizstan, Djibouti, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, are a necessary component of containing modern terrorism.

The basic premise and potential success of a neo-containment strategy has to do with appreciating the dysfunctional aspects innate to the political and social system terrorist organizations like al Qaeda espouse to create. Just as Stalinism was inherently volatile, bin Ladenism too proves a hollow and weak political system. It doesn’t have any “viable political economy” let alone the possibility for mass public support.<sup>17</sup> Just ask Fatah supporters living under Hamas, Somalis toiling under the Islamic Courts, Algerians living under the GIA, Afghans under

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Byman writes: “After Israel killed [Hamas co-founder Ahmed] Yassin [in 2004], Hamas appointed [Abdel Aziz] Rantisi as his successor. Israel promptly killed Rantisi. Hamas then announced that it had appointed a new leader but would not name him publicly: a necessary step for his survival perhaps but hardly a way to inspire the group’s followers or win new converts with a show of bravery.” Daniel Byman, “Do Targeted Killings Work?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85 (2), 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Shapiro, *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror*, (Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> The Brookings Institution, *Governing Ideas Series: Containing Global Terror*, (April 13, 2007), <<http://www3.brookings.edu/comm/events/20070413containment.pdf>>.

Taliban rule, and so on.<sup>18</sup> A xenophobic religious fanaticism, based on absolutist beliefs cannot be the basis for a modern, industrial political entity. Sooner or later, al Qaeda's political aspirations, write Arquilla and Ronfeldt, "will be rejected by the vast majority of the Muslim world for which they purport to be fighting."<sup>19</sup> In the short- and medium-term, hemming in these movements along with their supporters represents a feasible, offensive-oriented strategy. In this case, the best defence literally stems from the barrel of a gun.

Alongside domestically-based defensive counter-terror developments in border security, intelligence sharing, civil-military cooperation, air and seaport security, and so on, these four offensive counter-terror tactics will prove a robust and effective means for dealing with the emerging threat of global, catastrophic terrorism.

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, (Trans. Pascale Ghazaleh), (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Arquilla and Ronfeldt, "Osama bin Laden and the Advent of Netwar," 2.