

4 The Double-edged Nature of Impact Scalability and the Dynamic of Reciprocal Threat Perception

As shown in the preceding pages while reflecting upon the motives, objectives, organizations and means of PVMs in the past, nothing really is *intrinsically* new about the “New Terrorism” paradigm – excepting the *consensus* among experts in the field of terrorism research that ABC weapons in our day and age are more likely to be deployed by sub-state actors than in the past. Even so, the question of whether such a perspective is a mass media driven figment of public imagination that suits certain vested political interests of the day that have their own budgetary agendums, would almost certainly further dilute the above outlined paradigmatic project and the expert consensus on the PVM-WMD threat to a merely conjectural supposition. Again, the expert assessment prevails because weapons of mass destruction certainly *appear* to have become increasingly accessible in the post-Cold War period. On this issue, Morten Bremer Maerli asserts that “the overwhelming majority of incidents... do not reflect any significant escalation of the mass destruction threat, but rather a *growing interest* in non-conventional weaponry among politically and religiously motivated groups and individuals.”⁵¹

This is not to say that there is no substance to the fears expressed by the proponents of the “New Terrorism.” Even if the interest of such groups has not yet been successfully acted upon with respect to modern ABC weapons, the threat remains. This is true in spite

51 Morten Bremer Maerli, “Relearning the ABCs: Terrorists and ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction,’” *The Nonproliferation Review*, (Summer 2000), pp. 108–119, p. 110 (my italics). On this issue in regard to chemical and biological weapons cf. note 43, *supra*.

of massive counter-proliferation endeavors, such as the Nunn-Lugar Act passed in the United States Congress in 1991; and due to the fact that PVMs might consider them an acceptable, even attractive and “prestigious” means to an end, especially in the shape of a credible threat or deterrent vis-à-vis a more potent opponent.⁵² Indeed, in the wake of the Cold War, apprehensions concerning PVM acquisition of modern ABC weapons are not without substance.⁵³ While the Third Gulf War has recently been fought with the objective of stripping Iraq of its alleged WMD capabilities, apprehensions are rising amid controversial reports of the successful acquisition of weaponized chemical warfare agents produced in Iraq by al-Qaida via Usbat-al Ansar, an affiliated Lebanese Sunni PVM.⁵⁴

This threat-appraisal deriving from the “New Terrorism” paradigm is probably somewhat accurate, albeit with a single exception and corollary to the argument concerning weapons of mass casualty developed in this essay, and in the context of the wider debate on terrorism: PVMs’ awareness of a newfound, potentially unfettered capability to size the scale of the impact of their attacks. To date, the currently feasible trinity of the convergent *will, ability and capability* of PVMs to inflict mass casualties, bring about the destruction of entire urban areas, and occasion immeasurable trauma in the public psyche on a scale hitherto only conceivable in an armed conflict beyond the threshold of interstate war, has indeed no parallel: This condition constitutes a significant historical singularity. In a near

52 On the Cooperative Threat Reduction program introduced to the U.S. legislature by Senators Samuel Nunn and Richard Lugar cf. http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/NonProliferation/docs/kelly_wasteful_solution.htm and <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c102:H.R.3807>. ENR.: For further information on Nunn-Lugar programs cf. http://www.ucsusa.org/global_security/nuclear_weapons/page.cfm?pageID=639.

53 Walter Schilling, “Der islamische Terrorismus als Sicherheitsproblem,” *Der Mittler-Brief. Informationsdienst zur Sicherheitspolitik*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 1–8, pp. 6–7.

54 Barton Gellman, “Report Cites Al Qaeda Deal For Iraqi Gas,” *Washington Post*, 12 December 2002; Brian Whitaker, “The Papers That Cried Wolf,” *The Guardian*, (16 December 2002).

future (for which the present is somewhat indicative), PVMs' capability of almost limitless "*impact scalability*" will be, and is already taking shape as, the single most important contributing factor to a radical transformation of terrorism, and indeed of warfare. It will give new meaning to the conception of "strategic asymmetry."

In order to better envision this idea, imagine a band of radical militants successfully forcing the most powerful nation on this planet to its knees by threatening to deploy a substantial ABC weapon in the wake a number of successful minor attacks with WMD that cause mass casualties. If anything, it is this "impact scalability" at the beck and call of terrorist actors that would, and to some extent already does, make PVMs more dangerous now than ever before: Impact scalability expands the spectrum of terrorist tactics' asymmetric property in that it allows PVMs to calibrate even their attacks with WMD according to their requirements.

But while the queries and issues concerning the means – finances, logistics, weapons, etc. – have been discussed at large in the debate on the "New Terrorism" and nonproliferation, the multiple non-material factors, such as the specifics of background, environment, and other idiosyncrasies informing motives and perceived reality, as well as the resulting political and strategic priorities of PVMs' currently coalescing in the will to deploy weapons of mass destruction, have not yet been exhaustively investigated. And although some have ventured into this terra incognita of the violent PVM mindset, a not insignificant development responsible for the shaping of the terrorism risk perception has been largely neglected: The *dynamic of reciprocal threat perception* between perpetrators and victims of PVM mass casualty attacks.

The nature of the relationship between the waxing willingness of PVMs to use conventional or non-conventional mass casualty weapons, and the fearful expectation of ever more destructive mass casualty attacks involving ABC weapons, engendered by the mass media-induced "superterrorism scare" (to borrow Ehud Sprinzak's wording) in the wider context of the public discourse, is what also

makes today's PVMs more dangerous than before. The reason for this, I argue, is banal. In an age, in which the "superterrorism scare" reigns supreme and has successfully undermined governmental and public confidence in the past decade, most PVMs very likely are under increasing pressure to reify the popular nightmare of mass casualty terrorism that is the obsession of Western governments, their allies and the mass media alike.

This absurd situation prevails precisely because, in a bizarre way, the power to immobilize a powerful state by issuing the threat of deploying mass casualty weapons is not only a critical asset to PVMs, but has also been at the center of public expectation for at least a decade, and is considered even more probable today. And the reservoir of public expectation/apprehension continues to grow. This condition insidiously correlates with the rising pressure on PVMs to deploy mass casualty weapons in order "comply" with public apprehensions and thus to *maintain their own credibility vis-à-vis* their audience.⁵⁵ Conversely, PVMs are also subject to pressures building due to the opportunity presented to them by, and resulting from the impact of, the dynamic of reciprocal threat perception.

To summarize: Because PVMs themselves have not fundamentally changed in terms of their motives and objectives, the question of whether terrorism is more dangerous today or not has very little to do with the body of analyses that gave birth to the conception and recent rendition of the so-called "New Terrorism." Instead, this critical query is intricately linked with the interdependent problems of the long-term failure of nonproliferation; with the consequent increased probability that ABC weapons will sooner or later come within reach of terrorist actors; with the concomitant new development of PVMs of adjusting their strategy and objectives to include the augmented "impact scalability" of unconventional means at their disposal; and with the perceived threat that they represent, as

55 James K. Campbell, "On Not Understanding the Problem," p. 28.

well as with the general sense of insecurity this situation fosters. Most importantly, the danger of mass casualty terrorism in the present has become more tangible and acute because of the resulting “reciprocal dynamic of threat perception.” In contrast to the mere hypothetical threat, as it is perceived by expert participants integral to this process, it is here proposed that it is the “reciprocal dynamic of threat perception” which acts as the principal structural catalyst in the triggering of mass casualty terrorist attacks with conventional or unconventional weapons.

Considering the discussion so far, it would probably be more productive and sensible to refer to a recrudescence, or reanimation of preceding types of terrorism-user (e.g., the Zealot Sicarii referred to earlier in this essay, or the Islamic sect of Assassins, who already instrumentalized premeditated, systematic murder as a means of terrorizing their enemies and of cowering their opponents into submission – even at the cost of their own lives, not unlike their modern Middle Eastern counterparts), than to portentously proclaim the advent of the “New Terrorism.”⁵⁶ The bottom line really is that certain things do not change much. Perpetrators still intend to generate fear by using terrorist tactics. Whether this be the aggravation of fear among the few or among the many is a completely different issue and effectively has always been constrained by the means at the actors’ disposal. And only to a lesser degree has the use of terrorism been dependent upon grand strategy and optimistic operational planning. The reason for this is that PVM arsenals have hitherto proved no match for those at the disposal of their opponents.

With the advent and recent exacerbation of ABC weapons proliferation, terrorism’s fortunes may have undergone an advantageous reversal; the very circumstance of ABC weapon accessibility could be responsible for such a development, but certainly not to

56 For a concise and classic history of the Assassins cf., Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins. A Radical Sect in Islam*, (New York: Basic Books, 1967).

the exclusion of other reasons. Now that maximum firepower in the broadest sense is no longer out of reach, motive, as opposed to hardware, may in the future assume *the* determining position in the PVM framing of strategy, and in the decision-making process concerning the deployment of mass casualty weapons.

In other words, it is not exclusively the circumstance that these weapons have become available that makes contemporary PVMs more dangerous; it is the realization by PVMs in the past decade of what they can achieve by credibly threatening their deployment in pursuit of even the most audacious, but highly specific, objective, such as the destruction of a state's capital, or the end of the world. More critical still is the fact that in order to achieve "ABC credentials," PVMs will almost certainly have to deploy these fearsome weapons as proof of their determination. Unpredictable "ego-trips," impulsive revenge, competitive "showing-off": A whole range of unfathomable, diacritic and spontaneous internal group dynamics and other inter and intra-PVM motives also enter the purview of this scenario as probable factors in the non-premeditated category.

The glaring asymmetry of impact scalability in the service of PVMs comes to the fore in scenarios in which the effective use of ABC is not even necessary. Because of the widespread fear of the recently perceived mass casualty terrorist threat, PVMs might not have to do their worst in order to achieve their end, always provided that the objective is not the destruction of life on this planet. Bruce Hoffman believes that

...even the limited terrorist attack involving a chemical, biological or radiological weapon on a deliberately small scale could therefore have disproportionately enormous consequences, generating unprecedented fear and alarm and thus serve the terrorists' purpose just as well as a larger weapon or more ambitious attack with massive casualties could.⁵⁷

57 Bruce Hoffman, "New Forms of Terrorism and The Threat of Terrorist Use of Chemical, Biological, Nuclear and Radiological Weapons,"

Although Hoffman's observation is highly significant in itself, it does raise some issues. To begin with, such an operational implementation of sophisticated high-tech ABC weapons presupposes considerable expertise on the part of the deploying party, as well as the availability of advanced weapons technology in the field of delivery systems, which is indispensable to control the dimensions of an attack. Second, and more pertinent to the present purpose, Hoffman's observation raises the point of reciprocity in the idea of the reciprocal dynamic of threat perception: Not only does the fear of mass casualty terrorism pressure terrorists into complying with the public "standard" or "benchmark" of fear, but also maximizes the effects of the threatened use of, or the deployment of, a comparatively small ABC weapon.

This dangerous dynamic therefore constitutes a development that is beyond anybody's control and threatens to continue of its own volition. Its driving forces – impelling public fears of WMD terrorism and terrorists' appraisal of the largely untouched and highly attractive leverage against governments represented by the mere threat of ABC weapons' induced mass casualty terrorism –, are very difficult, if not impossible, to interrupt.

A first step to counter some of the worst effects of the dynamic of reciprocal threat perception beyond government organizations could be taken by the proactive sensitization of the mass media, and especially the broadcast media, to the destabilizing potential of the dynamic of reciprocal threat perceptions; and the curbing of economic incentives and pressures in the mass media, as well as the reduction of their adverse impact on the manner and quality of reporting among journalists. And, more controversially, the institution of self-censorship and the imposition of stringent restrictions on irresponsible, sensationalist reporting through leading members

in Kai Hirschmann, Peter Gerhard, eds., *Terrorismus als Weltweites Phänomen*, (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2000), pp. 37–44, p. 43.

of the various media branches in the interest of public safety ought to be evaluated anew.

Impact scalability and the pressures on the perpetrators and victims of terrorism that arise from the self-sustaining dynamic of reciprocal threat perceptions ought to be priority issues in the field of contemporary terrorism research. In the light of purported advanced weapons research involving the development of sophisticated and controllable delivery systems for chemical and biological weapons, such as dirigible and spatially limitable aerosols, and incrementally deployable viruses (infectior and trigger viruses), work on the effects of impact scalability of terrorist attacks becomes even more pressing. Atomic weapons research, for example, has culminated in the development of precision low-yield nuclear weapons.⁵⁸ Moreover, the proliferation problems with special reference to the former Soviet Union may here serve as an example of how advanced weapons technology in the shape of its products, the weapons, and its creators, the scientists, have in the meantime become, not only accessible, but available to sub-state actors.⁵⁹ Once out of the control of the government responsible for their development, either by design or by mistake, advanced precision delivery systems would draw even such PVMs to ABC weapons as vehicles to threaten mass casualty terrorism, as have hitherto shied away from considering them as an option because of their dependency upon “constituencies.” To continue this train of

58 Robert W. Nelson, “Low-Yield Earth-Penetrating Nuclear Weapons,” *Federation of American Scientists Public Interest Report*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (January/February 2001), pp. 1–5, p. 1. Concerning precision delivery systems for tactical ABC weapons, I have profited from private correspondence and conversations with Dr. David Humair, who is working on bioterrorism related issues at the Defence Strategy Section of the Swiss General Staff, and Dr. Morten Bremer Maerli, who specializes in terrorism and nuclear proliferation, at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). I would like to thank them both for their kind and expert advice on this issue.

59 Jessica Stern, *The Ultimate Terrorists*, p. 62.

thought, such new “customers” of B and C weapons would likely be those with the most operational experience in applying conventional terrorist tactics and asymmetric warfare: The long enduring, undefeated nationalist-irredentist and ethnic-separatist groups.

Yet still worse is the idea that controllable delivery systems for B and C weapons in the hands of PVMs would *lower* the threshold to use weapons of mass destruction in fulfillment of the “proof of concept” criteria that a terrorist group is in possession of an operational unconventional mass casualty weapon: The damage would not be as indiscriminate as with “ordinarily” deployed biological or chemical weapons. If such were indeed the case, it follows that the deterrent value represented by the risk of endangering one’s own constituents would be considerably diminished.

In evident contrast to established usage in the tradition of top-down policy analyses, the twin concepts of impact scalability and the dynamic of reciprocal threat perception, previously identified as a likely catalyst for the future PVM use of unconventional mass casualty terrorism, strive to approximate the bottom-up nature of asymmetric warfare and are thus intricately linked to the terrorist actors as the terminus a quo of terrorism. Once the means become available to the WMD perpetrator, knowledge of his psychological individual or group profile – of the way his mind works – will become the most powerful asset in the service of those forces opposing him.

This actor-centered position also differs from a widespread emphasis on the consequences of terrorist acts and the interpretation thereof by the mass media, or representations of PVM attacks generated in the broader context of the public discourse on the terrorist threat; it has little patience with the evanescent, faceless threat encountered on the policy level. After all, just how much of al-Qaida has really been authored by Usama Bin Laden, Muhammed Atef and Ayman al Zawahiri (all members of al-Qaida’s guiding *shura* council), and to what extent is the public perception of this organization driven by the absence of a serious

antagonist to the West following the cessation of Cold War tensions, Western governments' sudden awareness of new vulnerabilities and incentive-driven reporting by the broadcast media?