Dissuasion of Terrorists and Other Non-State Actors

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Introduction

Dissuasion—as put forward in the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) and other recent U.S. strategy documents—is targeted at states. Although there are questions about the potential role and efficacy of dissuasion with respect to states, there is an even more difficult question: Can it apply at all to terrorists and other non-state actors?

Dissuasion as a Strategic Concept

Dissuasion was put forward in the QDR as one of four U.S. strategic goals. The QDR refers to dissuasion as follows:

Through its strategy and actions, the United States influences the nature of future military competitions, channels threats in certain directions, and complicates military planning for potential adversaries in the future. Well targeted strategy and policy can therefore dissuade other countries from initiating future military competitions. The United States can exert such influence through the conduct of its research, development, test, and demonstration programs. It can do so by maintaining or enhancing advantages in key areas of military capability. Given the availability of advanced technology and systems to potential adversaries, dissuasion will also require the United States to experiment with revolutionary operational concepts, capabilities, and organizational arrangements and to encourage the development of a culture within the military that embraces innovation and risk-taking. To have a dissuasive effect, this combination of technical, experimental, and operational activity has to have a clear strategic focus.[2]

This concept was referenced or reiterated in other U.S. strategy documents, including the *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Dissuasion, like the other three strategic goals promulgated in the QDR, was advanced in the context of states. Dissuasion was to prevent political adversaries—including aspiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferants as well as possible peer competitors—from engaging in arms races or other direct military competitions with the United States through dominant U.S. military power.

There are other means to dissuade adversaries—both political-military and diplomatic—but these are not directly addressed in the Bush Administration's strategy. Attention should also be paid to the dissuasive effects of what Joseph Nye termed "soft power."[3] Neither the concept of dissuasion nor the tools to realize it are well developed, and the prospects of dissuasion are unclear.

To the extent that realizing dissuasion as a strategic objective is achievable, three approaches should be considered: first, ensure the entry cost/threshold for competition are too high; second, eliminate any benefits ensuing from competition; and third, increase the negative consequences of competition. These approaches will be difficult to undertake, and uncertain of success. But, if they can be achieved, dissuasion may become an important arrow in the U.S. strategic quiver.

Dissuasion and Deterrence

Dissuasion is closely connected to deterrence (as is clear from the second and third approaches put forward above). This link is primarily to deterrence by denial, rather than by punishment, which is also directed at states. The boundaries between dissuasion and deterrence by denial are difficult to draw. Both come into play where, and to the extent that, U.S. military capabilities, including active and passive defenses, make the pursuit of an activity against the United States, its friends and allies pointless or even counterproductive. One way to differentiate the two concepts is to consider dissuasion to be focused on preventing the acquisition of a capability, and deterrence by denial on precluding its use. In this sense, dissuasion could potentially address an area where deterrence and other measures have fallen short—i.e., the acquisition of military capabilities, including weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However this conceptual approach may not capture all the possibilities and, in any case, also raises questions.

Can Terrorism be Dissuaded?

It would appear that dissuasion would likely be wholly or largely irrelevant to the emerging threat of terrorism. Overwhelming U.S. military dominance may lead other states to eschew competition in key areas, but in some cases it has resulted in asymmetric threats by states. Historically, the might of states has been a spur for their opponents to use terrorism as an asymmetric response. And the dominance across a full spectrum of military and other capabilities exhibited by the United States since the end of the Cold War has led adversaries to use terrorism—a classic asymmetric response.

There is, of course, no possibility of a terrorist network competing with the United States in the literal sense of seeking equality. However, like states, terrorists may seek weapons of mass destruction capabilities as the surest means to oppose the United States—and may even believe the threat or use of such capabilities will affect U.S. behavior vis-à-vis the war on terrorism, regional interventions, detention of al Qaeda and other terrorist operatives, etc. If this perception holds, dissuasion of any kind will not be practicable.

It is widely believed that one cannot dissuade terrorists and other non-state actors for the same reasons they are seen to be undeterrable: such as their lack of a "return address," or for other reasons such as religious fanaticism of the terrorists. It does appear that while U.S. military might has killed terrorists and disrupted operations, it has not to date had a dissuasive effect on terrorism overall and, apparently as well, on terrorism using weapons of mass destruction. During the post-Cold War era marked by U.S. "unipolar" ascendancy, we have seen terrorism increase in deadliness, culminating in the first significant modern acts of WMD terrorism. But the assumptions behind this belief—that terrorism can not be deterred or dissuaded—may be flawed, as terrorists have to be somewhere, they have historically mimicked states in key areas and are

thus subject to constraints and influences of various kinds.

These considerations should not ignored—and, in any event, the record to date is not the final word. The objective of dissuasion is only newly articulated in strategic terms. And the war on terrorism, which can be expected to influence terrorist behavior, has only just begun in earnest. Both may develop in ways in which dissuasion of terrorists may appear credible. But credibility is just a precondition. There remains the issue of whether the strategy of terrorism, or, at least certain terrorist behavior, can be effectively dissuaded. From this perspective, even if unlikely to lead terrorists to forego terrorism, an effective dissuasion policy could affect terrorists' decisions on specific targets and weapons. This may appear to be limited, but recall that dissuasion has issues with respect to its efficacy even in state contexts.

Possibilities for Dissuading Terrorism

It seems possible that one can, in principle, dissuade terrorists and other non-state actors. It is unlikely that dissuasion will be effective against all groups of terrorists or forms of terrorism. Currently operating terrorist are unlikely to be dissuaded at all, but perhaps potential or future terrorists could be dissuaded from at least some actions. Non-state supporters of terrorists, including terrorist financiers, can also be dissuaded, as can state supporters.

If one had "infallible" intelligence and "absolute" security, if one could block all terrorist funding or remove all conditions conducive to the rise of terrorism, terrorists and their supporters would be unable to operate and presumably, over time, would be marginalized if not wholly eliminated. Of course, we will not have such capabilities, but continued improvements in all of these areas could effect at least some groups' decisions to pursue terrorism or to receive the support they require for their operations. In particular, transforming command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and, in particular, development of more capable human intelligence (HUMINT), may prove particularly critical. Homeland security and active and passive defenses, which *inter alia* seek to prevent or to limit the damage from terrorist attacks, are also important in this regard.

In similar fashion, a targeted use of soft power could be used—not alone, but in conjunction with other instruments of power—to try to challenge terrorist ideology, expose or undercut supporters, weaken recruiting, etc. Programs designed to affect ideologies, financing and conditions conductive to terrorism are essential, including effective public diplomacy. Recognition of the promise of this approach, even if it is not directly or exclusively tied to dissuasion, appears to ground the *National Security Strategy*, where enhancing the development and use of soft power is more prominent than preemption doctrine. As well, this appears to be consistence with the sense of the UN goal of dissuading terrorism. According to Security-General Kofi Anan: "We must dissuade the would-be-perpetrators of terror by setting effective norms and implementing relevant legal instruments; by an active public information campaign; and by rallying international consensus behind the fight against terrorism. To achieve effective dissuasion, it is essential to remember that the fight against terrorism is above all a fight to preserve fundamental rights and sustain the rule of law."[4]

Whether hard or soft, none of these actions will dissuade all terrorism, but, as suggested, they may dissuade some groups from some forms of terrorism. If dissuasion is designed to have an effect on acquisition of weapons, it must be noted that the weapons of terrorists, with the exception of at least some WMD, are readily obtainable. On the basis of this reasoning, to the extent that nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction are more difficult to acquire, if dissuasion were to have an effect, it may be more likely to affect acquisition of these weapons than conventional terrorist capabilities. There is a parallel in the realm of states: for all of their

weaknesses, nonproliferation efforts, at least in the nuclear sphere, have arguably been important to the largely successful efforts dissuading most states from acquiring these revolutionary weapons. This is unprecedented in military history.

Possibilities for Dissuading WMD Terrorism

If dissuading WMD terrorism appears to be more feasible than dissuading conventional terrorism, this is due to a number of factors. The technical and political obstacles to WMD terrorism may in themselves be dissuasive to some degree: Significant WMD capabilities in most cases are difficult either to produce or to disseminate (or both), they increase the prospects for detection or interdiction, and they may produce unintended, counterproductive results.

Every effort needs to be made to increase these obstacles. Enhanced intelligence and security have a role here insofar as they make it possible to prevent, disrupt or mitigate the effects of an attack. But any action that looks to complicate the calculations of terrorists seeking WMD and, thereby, to increase the prospect of detection or to reduce the chances of operational success, could be dissuasive. In a similar fashion, any action that makes it more likely a WMD attack will not achieve the terrorists' goals, or would be counterproductive, could have a dissuasive effect.

How might these possibilities be realized?

Targeting Non-State Actors

Whether one thinks of terrorists themselves or the other non-state actors that could support them in acquiring WMD, including multinational corporations, black marketers, criminal organizations, etc., there may be scope for dissuasion. In all cases, U.S. military-technological superiority *per se* is not the most important element of a dissuasive strategy.

Such a strategy would have to be clearly and publicly articulated in declaratory policy, and specifically target each non-state actor. There must be a multi-pronged effort to make these actors understand that their pursuit of WMD terrorism will not, in the end, succeed—because the terrorists will have difficulty acquiring significant capabilities; they will have difficulty using any capability they acquire; any WMD they use will not have the consequences they desire, and will provoke the harshest response imaginable to themselves and those who support them.

Will such an effort bear fruit? It may, but as suggested, active terrorists may no longer be dissuadable. Other actors may be better targets of dissuasion. For example, multilateral or multinational entities that make key capabilities available to terrorists may, in principle, be dissuaded by a credible threat to deny their participation in the benefits of the global marketplace. Financiers and individuals with requisite weapons expertise might be dissuaded from assisting terrorists by criminalizing their activities and subjecting them to condign punishment.

Targeting State Supporters and Sponsors

To the extent that effective WMD terrorism, especially nuclear, may derive from states' WMD programs, there may be additional scope for dissuasion. If you can dissuade WMD proliferators, you will reduce the prospect of WMD terrorism. As noted, overall nonproliferation efforts have had a dissuasive effect on most states. But the acquisition of WMD capabilities by certain states, such as aggressors or aspirants to global status, has been and continues to be difficult to deter and dissuade, particularly as these weapons, at least nuclear weapons, are seen to be an "equalizer" to U.S. power.

However difficult, dissuading state proliferation appears essential if one hopes to dissuade WMD terrorism. It may be critical, especially for nuclear terrorism. This thought appears in the UN goal of "denial." The Secretary-General called for, *inter alia*, "strengthening global norms against the use or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."[5] To underscore this point, he stated: "Given the levels of inhumanity to which modern-day terrorists have descended, efforts to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction have assumed new urgency."[6]

In similar fashion, state supporters and sponsors of terrorism can, in principle, be dissuaded as states. The uneven record to date of responses to states that support or sponsor terrorism raises some questions. Whatever their intended effect, the military operations in Afghanistan, and possibly Iraq, could offer concrete cases on which to base the dissuasion, as well as the deterrence, of future state sponsors. If it can be realized, dissuading state sponsors should have a disproportionate effect on WMD terrorism, which becomes more likely if weapons are transferred to terrorists, or if states provide terrorists with a secure operational base, technological and/or financial support. Consequently, it would appear that the goal of dissuasion of WMD terrorism needs to be pursued in conjunction with other objectives, using a wide range of tools.

Differentiating WMD

As we look at these possibilities more closely, it is important to address nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological threats separately. Such an approach can consider the significant differences in, and impacts of, these weapons, as well as the different instruments that can be brought to bear in each case:

- Nuclear: A decision to undertake nuclear terrorism can, in principle, be dissuaded by keeping weapons, materials and expertise from the terrorists. Support for the international nuclear nonproliferation regime can help provide a legal and normative basis for dissuasion, but there is little reason to believe the regime in and of itself will affect the behavior of terrorists. Some regime and extra-regime elements, even if designed with states in mind, might do so. Improved non- and counterproliferation efforts, including enhanced export controls, safeguards, material protection, control and accountancy (MPC&A) and other cooperative threat reduction efforts, interdiction (via the Proliferation Security Initiative, or PSI), etc., can reduce the prospects of nuclear terrorism. Advances in R&D leading to the deployment of more effective technologies to detect, disable, and disarm nuclear weapons may enhance such efforts. If these measures pose significant challenges or obstacles to terrorists, they may effectively dissuade nuclear terrorism.

- Radiological: Radiological dispersal devices (RDDs, or dirty bombs) do not pose the same technological challenges to terrorists as nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, tighter controls over radiological sources as well as enhancing damage limitation through the development/deployment of effective, cheap and quick cleanup technologies have the potential to dissuade radiological terrorism.

- Bio/Chem: Chemical and biological agents/capabilities are in most cases too readily obtainable to effectively stop their spread at the source in the same way that nuclear materials can be. Nonetheless, significant chemical and biological terrorism can perhaps be dissuaded to some extent. Supporting multilateral treaties and other efforts in this area can be useful in providing legitimacy for dissuasive efforts, but only a few regime and extra-regime tools are likely to influence terrorists to any degree. Effective export controls, interdiction through PSI, etc., as well as R&D on detection and other capabilities can potentially be useful. The ability to limit damage through effective passive defenses

offers potentially significant leverage, and appears to have direct parallels with dissuasive effects in states in this sphere.

Conclusion

The prospect of dissuading states is uncertain at best; dissuading terrorists and other non-state actors is even more so. Clearly, dissuasion must not be limited to its military-technological dimensions. Even if a multi-pronged approach is useful, it is unlikely to be the primary, or even a prominent, tool in dealing with terrorism, including WMD terrorism. It may not be effective in all cases—and perhaps not in any. Nonetheless, dissuasion could be an important tool for influencing terrorist decisions on using WMD, particularly if it can affect their decision to acquire these deadly weapons by leading terrorists to decide the pursuit of WMD terrorism will be slow, difficult and costly, and will not produce their desired results. This conclusion could, in principle, be reinforced by the additional threat of overwhelming punishment of terrorists, financiers, suppliers and state supporters of terrorists who seek to acquire and use WMD.

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