Deterring the Devil

Deterrence as a Counter-Terrorism Strategy

"Deterrence is the art of producing, in the mind of the enemy, the fear to attack"

In the 21st century, terrorism has become ubiquitous in international relations and its study. Some believe that today's terrorism is a new phenomenon, citing its predominantly Islamic fundamentalist nature and rising prevalence. But terrorism is nothing new in the history of international relations. Terrorism is in some ways the volcano of international relations, sometimes it sends rumbles through society and sometimes it even changes the socio-political landscape; but at other times it lies dormant as an ineffective tool of politics. September 11, 2001 was the metaphorical eruption of modern terrorism. Technological advances in information communications, like the Internet and 24 Hour news media outlets, gave new effectiveness to the messages that could be raised through terrorism. But what is the mechanism of international relations that can deal with this offshoot strategy of modern warfare? Nevertheless, as long as states can deter some terrorists from engaging in certain types of terrorist activity, deterrence should be an essential element of a broader counter-terrorism strategy.

Strategies for Deterring Terrorism
- Direct Retaliation
- Indirect Retaliation
- Tactical Denial
- Strategic Denial

Direct Retaliation Strategy

Direct response strategies are those that aim to deter an adversary by threatening to retaliate against the adversary for taking hostile action. This type of strategy is probably the most widely understood form of deterrence. These strategies also are sometimes referred to as "retaliation" or "punishment" strategies. While it may be true that it is difficult to deter suicide bombers with retaliatory threats, not all members of a terrorist network are suicide bombers. Many terrorist leaders, financiers, supporters, radical clerics, and other members of terrorist networks value their lives and possessions. Simple threats of imprisonment and death against these actors can deter terrorist activity. For example, the United Kingdom has

shown that threatening imprisonment can deter radical clerics from preaching incendiary sermons. Other members of a terrorist organization's support network also can be deterred by simple threats of retaliation.[1]

According to a 9/11 Commission Staff Report, for example, the Saudi government's enhanced scrutiny of donors after 9/11 appears to have deterred some terrorist financing. The lesson for counter-terrorism is clear: the simple threat to punish individuals engaging in terrorist activity can have a significant deterrent effect. Moreover, terrorist organizations themselves might also be deterred by the threat of retaliation. While it has become cliché́ to point out that terrorists lack a return address, many successful organizations actually depend heavily on a safe haven from which to operate. Hamas controls Gaza, Hezbollah has Lebanon, and before 9/11 al-Qaeda was extended a safe haven in Afghanistan. To the degree that a state can threaten to revoke an important safe haven, terrorist leaders may be deterred.[2]

Indirect Retaliation Strategy

Indirect response strategies are those that deter by threatening to retaliate, not against terrorists themselves, but against something else that terrorists hold dear. While it is sometimes difficult to retaliate against specific terrorists, states may be able to threaten (or convince terrorists that their own actions might harm) other things they value such as their families, assets, and communities. An example of an indirect response strategy is Israel's past policy of demolishing the homes of suicide bombers' families. Israel could not threaten to punish suicide bombers themselves because they were dead after a successful attack, but it did retaliate against their families. Alternatively, states may be able to employ strategies that aim merely to shape terrorists' perceptions about how terrorist activity could negatively affect their families and communities.[3]

Professor Thomas Schelling has argued that radical Islamic terrorists may be deterred from conducting a biological attack if they become convinced that the outbreak of a communicable disease in the West, given the inter-connectedness of the modern world, could make its way back to, and kill many Muslims in, the Middle East. In addition, states can threaten to deny strategic success e.g., communicate that demands for withdrawal of Kenyan troops from Somalia will not be met, even in the face of terrorist attacks.[4]

Tactical Denial

Tactical denial strategies are those that, simply put, threaten failure at the tactical level. They deter terrorism by threatening to deny terrorists the ability to successfully conduct an attack. If terrorists believe that an attack is likely to fail, they will be less motivated to waste time and resources by attempting to carry it out. Given the value that terrorists place on operational success, states can deter terrorism by convincing terrorists that operations are likely to fail. For this reason, simple homeland security measures can deter terrorist attacks. Improving domestic intelligence and hardening key targets are strong deterrents to attack. Indeed, we know of many cases in which terrorists were deterred from carrying out an attack by the fear of failure. For example, an Al-Qaeda affiliate planned to attack a U.S. military base in Turkey in late 2003, but the United States improved its defenses at the site during the planning stages, and the terrorists called off the attack.[5]

Strategic Denial

Strategic denial policies deter terrorism by threatening to deny terrorists strategic benefits, even in the face of successful terrorist attacks. In this way, strategic denial strategies seek to break the perceived link between successful terrorist operations and the goals they intended to serve. Terrorists may be deterred from attacking if they believe that even a string of highly successful attacks will not help them achieve those broader political goals. A strategy of systematically denying terrorists' strategic objectives begins with identifying those objectives.

Many terrorist organizations share a basic strategy: terrorists attack civilian targets to terrorize the population protected by that government. Terrorists hope that the terrorized populace will then pressure the government to take action to stop the mayhem. Finally, terrorists hope that, in response to popular pressure, governments will concede to the terrorists' political demands in exchange for a cessation of violence. States can deter terrorism by identifying and denying, rather than ceding, the objectives sought in the terror strategy. For example, some countries have learned to limit media coverage of terror attacks to reduce the publicity sought by terrorist organizations. Simply limiting coverage of terrorist attacks can reduce the publicity benefits sought by those organizations. For example, following the terrorist attacks on a resort in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt in the summer of 2005, Egyptian authorities draped a giant white sheet over the damaged hotel. When television crews arrived to get footage of a gaping, smoking hole in the side of the building, what they got instead was a blank white screen.[6]

Some terrorists might be driven more by ideological goals than by politics. Still, even these individuals could be deterred if the United States can deny them these non material objectives. For example, states can work with mainstream Muslim clerics to point out that suicide is contrary to Islamic teachings. If individuals increasingly doubt whether a suicide mission will lead to personal salvation, they may calculate that the costs of terrorist activity outweigh the benefits.

This is a comprehensive framework for deterring terrorist networks. We argue that deterrence can only achieve partial success and will only ever be a component, not the cornerstone, of counter-terrorism strategy. Despite its limited role, deterrence is an essential part of an effective counter-terrorism approach.

REFERENCES:

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