

Dealing with the threat posed by non-state armed groups aspiring to weapons of mass destruction

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The international system has been destabilized since the Cold War by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); there are a number of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), as well as states, that are determined to acquire WMD and their delivery vehicles.¹ Non-state armed groups include a wide range of actors with different objectives, extending from those that uphold extremist religious principles to racist militia groups and freedom fighters, revolutionaries, armed opposition groups, etc. Most NSAGs are unlikely to attempt to access WMD because the effects of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons cannot be controlled and may go far beyond their expectations or intentions; they may even seriously harm their supporters. Should this happen, the organization may lose political and other forms of support.

But there is a small subset of NSAGs—terrorists—to whom a WMD attack is appealing. This is because such organizations may not be at all concerned with the horrible damage that a WMD attack can cause. Members of such organizations may even believe that their WMD attacks will mean that more people will become "martyrs" (rather than victims) and will go to paradise along with them. The concern of this paper, therefore, is with this small subset. The article attempts to assess the very particular threat that is posed by NSAGs who aspire to WMD, as well as to consider the appropriate and feasible responses.

After the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, the international community became aware that a non-state entity, namely Al-Qaida, had established a worldwide network—reportedly in more than 70 countries—with the involvement of thousands of people from almost all strata of the population and with diverse professional backgrounds. Al-Qaida aims, among other things, to install a new global order according to its radical interpretation of the Koran. Having seen what Al-Qaida is capable of without WMD at its disposal, it is not difficult to imagine what it would do if and when it possessed WMD capabilities.

To date, NSAGs have not been successful in staging a major WMD attack, with the exception of the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995 by Aum Shinrikyo, which caused a dozen fatalities and thousands of injuries.² But there is no guarantee that a devastating attack by a terrorist NSAG may not or will not occur any time soon. A number of non-state entities are known to be in search of ways to acquire or develop WMD, and the end of the Cold War witnessed the abolition of strict Soviet control over military installations, be they weapons production facilities or research laboratories. There are very few parameters or indicators according to which one could base an analysis of the likelihood of future attacks by terrorist NSAGs.

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Traditional threat assessment

Threat is a combination of military capabilities and malevolent intentions. In the absence of these intentions, the presence of military capabilities may be considered only as posing a potential threat. Likewise, if intentions do not match capabilities, threat may not be seen as imminent. Therefore, a sound threat assessment should take into consideration both the military capabilities and the intentions of a given adversary at a given time.

That said, one must also bear in mind the fact that the development of military capabilities takes time, usually in the order of years if not decades, whereas a change in intentions may occur much more rapidly, depending on changes in the international environment, or in socio-political, economic, scientific or technological conditions. Moreover, unlike military capabilities, whose magnitude may be visible or detectable by way of intelligence, intentions may be extremely hard to determine (they may very well be deliberately concealed).

It is possible to make some assessment of the threat posed by states, whose territories, cadres of leadership, industrial and military installations and other strategic assets are known with relative certainty. In addition to these visible and detectable capabilities, there are sophisticated methods and means to make a good assessment of the intentions of individuals who are known to be involved in the decision-making mechanisms of the states of concern through, for example, analysing their psychological profiles or their reactions to developments in the past. States are assumed to be administered by leadership cadres that are composed of rational individuals who make cost-benefit analyses of their behaviour and the likely consequences. This is one reason that deterrence theory proved successful and the threats posed to national security and international stability by the acquisition of WMD were neutralized during the Cold War period.³ The threat of mutual annihilation by nuclear weapons left no room for miscalculation about the magnitude of the adversary's military capabilities and their possible effects and consequences.

Deterrence is effective if several conditions are met. First, there must be an aggressor planning to use force against a defender. Second, there must be a defender planning to offset the potential act of the aggressor by exploiting threat methods.⁴ Lastly, for deterrence to be successful, the aggressor must choose not to attack because of the threat posed by the defender.⁵ Deterrence therefore requires clarity concerning both what the aggressor must not do and the potential consequences of persisting, since the success of deterrence depends on the aggressor's decision of whether to go ahead. The defender must be sure that the aggressor receives the message properly; even if the defender's threat is sincere, deterrence might still fail if the aggressor is ignorant of the threat.⁶ Public statements and other methods are used to communicate the cost and risk of an action to an aggressor. However, the aggressor may fail to interpret the threat message correctly for numerous reasons—cultural barriers, internal concerns or emotional strain.⁷

For deterrence to be successful, it must be credible, based on capability, cost and intentions. That is, the aggressor should understand that the defender is capable of taking action.⁸ If the defender's statements seem hesitant or are expressed in vague terms then the threat in particular, and deterrence in general, will not prove persuasive.

It is clear that deterrence brings into relief the psychological relationship among opposing sides. Hence, the emotions, perceptions and calculations of decision makers are at the centre of deterrence policy.⁹ For this reason, a deterrence policy is based not only on the actual capability and the willpower of the defender to carry out commitments, but also on the defender's skill to convey this capability and determination to the aggressor. Unfortunately, the cautiously coded intentions of defenders frequently fail to make the expected impact on the aggressor because the aggressor is oblivious to the deterrent threat, or finds it incredible.¹⁰

The challenges of confronting non-state armed groups' WMD threat

The strategic context that had long rested on a delicate nuclear balance has come to an end.¹¹ Terrorist NSAGs, which have developed state-like hierarchical command structures, have started to become influential actors at the political and military arena. The appearance of these political and quasi-military entities in the centre stage of international politics has disturbed the long-running stability and predictability of the international system, and threatened international peace and security.

Our toolbox of responses is outdated or ineffective when it comes to the terrorist NSAG threat. Unlike the majority of the decision-making bodies of states in the international arena, terrorist NSAGs and their members do not necessarily undertake classical, rational cost-benefit analyses.¹² For most rational actors, the greatest cost might be to lose one's life—for an irrational one, this may not be considered a cost. Nor are material gains necessarily regarded as benefits. The terrorist NSAGs with which we are concerned here are not interested in classical separatist or ideological struggles, either.

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Again, contrary to states, whose capabilities are to a great extent visible and who disseminate some intelligence, accidentally or on purpose, about their intentions to resort to force within a foreseeable time frame (for instance, by conducting unusually large-scale military manoeuvres), many terrorist NSAGs are almost invisible, which makes it hard to track their capabilities, let alone to detect their intentions about when and where they plan to stage an assault. Under these circumstances, deterrence is unlikely to succeed.

When a physical base can be located, NSAGs will be operating from within the physical territory of a state or multiple states—either with or without the support of a state. The difficulty of militarily engaging a NSAG includes that of launching an attack on a sovereign state's territory. In some cases, the only politically and militarily viable option seems to be to hold states responsible for giving logistical support to such entities and to threaten them with retaliation in kind. This was the case in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The United States held Afghanistan and Sudan responsible for providing support to the NSAG that staged the attacks and retaliated via a cruise missile strike. Some US authorities claimed that, had the attacks on their embassies been chemical or biological in nature, the response to Afghanistan and Sudan could have been with nuclear weapons.¹³

In the past, terrorist groups needed state sponsorship for shelter as well as logistical and financial support. Today, developments in technology and science may soon render such support unnecessary, (if such is not already the case). NSAGs have become very sophisticated in their operations. They may not always have specific headquarters, military bases, or standing armies against which an attacked country can launch retaliatory strikes.

Efforts to convey a message of determination or to display the capability to strike back will therefore have no significant impact on covert and irrational groups. Traditional responses, like deterrence, are highly likely to fail. There is currently no confidence interval within the margins of which one may feel relatively safe against actual or potential adversaries in the form of NSAGs.

A need for new approaches

Although US President George W. Bush's statement in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001—appealing to the peoples of the world by saying that "you are either with us or against us" in the fight against terror—attracted many harsh criticisms, it is not totally unfounded to argue that the world is indeed diametrically divided between those who fight, or at least acknowledge the necessity

to fight, against terrorist organizations or the non-state armed groups that are categorized as such, and those who sympathize with them.¹⁴ This division among states and the absence of unity—or even similarity—on a definition of terrorism or terrorists, make the fight against such NSAGs very difficult. Terrorism has become a global problem and should therefore be dealt with by means of cooperation and collaboration at the global level.

New approaches are clearly needed to prevent terrorist NSAGs from fulfilling their objectives. When classical deterrence is likely to fail, taking measures to be able to pre-empt terrorists as well as to prevent possible attacks gains importance. But these measures must be employed only against the NSAG targeted, not against the state from whose territory the group operates. Pre-emptive action against states can be an option only when there is undeniable evidence of collaboration between a state and a NSAG to stage an imminent attack. Pre-emption will be problematic and will have serious political implications, especially if a state is attacked, no matter the underlying reason.

SHARING INTELLIGENCE

One of the most significant and possibly most effective instruments in the fight against terrorist NSAGs is intelligence. However, there are particular challenges to gathering intelligence about terrorist NSAGs. In this age of advanced information technologies available to all, members of a terrorist network do not need to know other members of the network or to meet them in person in order to plan and carry out attacks effectively. In the absence of a specific location where terrorists meet, and bearing in mind the difficulty of tracking their online interactions among the trillions carried out around the globe every day, even the most sophisticated intelligence services with their cutting-edge technological gadgets face unprecedented challenges in attempting to gauge the threat.

This is where human intelligence—in the form of infiltration—comes into play. Because understanding the minds of terrorists is crucial. Since decisions about where to attack and how are taken within small groups, which are getting even smaller, in the forms of cells spread around the world, intelligence from within these groups is vital to enable timely preventive measures. Admittedly, even this is getting more difficult; the probability of recruiting agents or buying off informants may well be diminishing because of the low value placed on material benefits (the usual method of recruitment) by such people, particularly members of extreme religious groups.

Terrorist networks are global, therefore intelligence must be shared globally. States should do their utmost to cooperate. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge the deeply rooted difficulties of sharing intelligence among states—it is very difficult even to share intelligence among a state's national institutions. Yet there are some examples, both at the national and international levels, which may prove to be sources of inspiration.

At the state level, for instance, the United States has embarked upon a large-scale restructuring process of its entire chain of intelligence gathering and sharing. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which is responsible for collecting intelligence concerning the capabilities and intentions of other states, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is responsible for nationwide intelligence gathering, have combined their efforts under the umbrella of a larger institution, the Directorate of National Intelligence (DNI).¹⁵ It is hoped that the flow of intelligence will be faster and more credible, and that the relevant US authorities will be better informed about the possible dangers associated with terrorist attacks. It is believed that thanks to the DNI, the chances of preventing future attacks will be higher. However, many elements of these reforms have yet to take effect.

There are inherent difficulties in sharing intelligence due to the very nature of the business. Some believe information should remain secret and sacred for the sake of longer-term uses of the sources. Another obstacle arises from different perspectives regarding the definition of terrorism and

terrorists. States may fear losing control over the effects of information they will supply to their allies, which may result in developments that they do not want to be associated with. (This has been the case with information supplied by allied states, which has been used, and abused, by the CIA with regard to the capture and interrogation of Al-Qaida suspects—strong popular reactions have caused serious political problems for these allies.) But these difficulties must be overcome. Some means of cooperation must be found at the international level before it is too late.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) may be an appropriate venue to gather and share intelligence collectively. NATO already has a very sophisticated infrastructure, and it is currently expanding both in terms of membership, and also in terms of the scope of its mission. No longer is NATO an organization concerned with territorial defence against a clearly defined enemy. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been undergoing a comprehensive transformation to meet emerging challenges. Its command and control structure, as well as its planning capabilities, are being steadily upgraded.¹⁶ Its technological supremacy is being supplemented with elements that, it is hoped, will enable the alliance to expand its human intelligence capability.

NATO membership is changing just as dramatically. In addition to enlargement to 26 full members (all of which are from the transatlantic area), NATO's zone of operation has been expanding by virtue of cooperative schemes established between the alliance and like-minded states in other parts of the world, such as the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as the Balkan states, within the framework of the Partnership for Peace, or countries from North Africa and the Levant under the Mediterranean Dialogue. NATO's Centres of Excellence also allow for ad hoc special arrangements with countries for the exchange of expertise and intelligence as well as training.¹⁷

The NATO Summit that took place in Istanbul in late June 2004 hinted at the possibility of exchange of information between existing members and other states that have both the capability and the will to collect and share intelligence. For instance, NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), launched at the summit, aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. It focuses on practical cooperation in areas where NATO can add value, notably in the security field, starting with the individual members of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The ICI is based on joint ownership and the mutual interests of NATO and the countries of the region, taking into account their diversity and specific needs. The process is distinct, yet it takes into account and complements other international initiatives including by the Group of Eight and international organizations such as the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The ICI offers a "menu" of bilateral activities that countries can choose from, including cooperation in the fight against terrorism, through intelligence-sharing and cooperation in the alliance's work on the proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it is difficult to argue that much has been achieved thus far.

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Nonetheless, it remains that the existing NATO platform has a built-in credibility earned over many years, and should be exploited to the most. Its capabilities should be made commensurate with the challenges. Additional countries should be invited to collaborate with NATO countries, either by way of becoming full or associate members or partners.

PREVENTING TRAFFICKING OF WMD

NATO is not the only mechanism whereby effective cooperation may be achieved in the fight against terrorism. The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is one tool that has been put in operation by the United States with the cooperation of friendly countries.

PSI is a global initiative aimed at stopping shipments of WMD, their delivery systems, and related materials worldwide. Announced by US President George W. Bush on 31 May 2003, it originates in the US National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction, issued in December 2002, which recognizes the need for more robust tools to defeat the proliferation of WMD around the world. The goal of PSI is to create a more dynamic, creative and proactive approach to preventing proliferation to or from states and non-state actors of proliferation concern. The PSI seeks to use existing legal authorities—national and international—to defeat proliferation.¹⁹

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1540, adopted unanimously by the Security Council on 28 April 2004, calls on all states to take cooperative action to prevent trafficking in WMD. It:

8. *Calls upon* all States:

- (a) To promote the universal adoption and full implementation, and, where necessary, strengthening of multilateral treaties to which they are parties, whose aim is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons;
- (b) To adopt national rules and regulations, where it has not yet been done, to ensure compliance with their commitments under the key multilateral non-proliferation treaties;
- (c) To renew and fulfill their commitment to multilateral cooperation, in particular within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, as important means of pursuing and achieving their common objectives in the area of non-proliferation and of promoting international cooperation for peaceful purposes;
- (d) To develop appropriate ways to work with and inform industry and the public regarding their obligations under such laws;

9. *Calls upon* all States to promote dialogue and cooperation on non-proliferation so as to address the threat posed by proliferation of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, and their means of delivery;

10. Further to counter that threat, *calls upon* all States, in accordance with their national legal authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, to take cooperative action to prevent illicit trafficking in nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, their means of delivery, and related materials.²⁰

For Resolution 1540 to be effective, states must fully and effectively implement the binding decisions of the Security Council. To what extent Member States will respond to the calls of the Security Council remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Those NSAGs that aspire to obtain and use WMD are difficult to locate and difficult to assess. The threat they pose cannot be deterred by conventional deterrence, and new approaches must be found. Controlling the actual means of attack—WMD and their related materials—may prove one of the more effective means of addressing the threat. Resolution 1540 and the PSI are a good start, although cooperation on both these initiatives must be much more widespread for them to have a positive impact.

Nonetheless, the NSAGs themselves cannot be neglected. It is crucial to gain intelligence about these groups—both their capabilities and their intentions. As the membership of these groups is spread globally, intelligence will only be useful if states cooperate and pool their resources. This

concept of sharing poses a significant challenge to age-old traditions of secrecy and years of suspicion among states. On the other hand, the consequences of not working collectively could be devastating. Effective measures must be put in place—and soon—in order to prevent the transfer of WMD, and the materials as well as technology and scientific knowledge required in their manufacture, into the hands of NSAGs.

Notes

1. See Mustafa Kibaroglu, 2004, "Turkey's Sweet & Sour Policy against NBC Weapons", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2, summer, p. 101.
2. The cult, whose name means "the ultimate truth", is believed to be composed of a worldwide network including scientists and experts in many fields, extending from medicine to engineering, and from archaeology to natural sciences. Cult members were arrested during an attempt to buy uranium mines in Australia; they are also known to have travelled to Central Africa to learn about the deadly Ebola virus (S. Day, J. Parachini, and W. Rosenau, 2005, *Aum Shinrikyo, Al Qaeda and the Kinshasa Reactor: Implications of Three Case Studies for Combating Nuclear Terrorism*, Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, p. 18; Kyle B. Olson, 1999, "Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?" *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, vol. 5, no. 4, at <www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol5no4/olson.htm>).
3. There are two key notions of deterrence in political or military context, namely deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. The former includes a threat to inflict destruction upon the civilian population and industry of the opponent in the form of a punitive action. The latter calls for the persuasion of the opponents that they will fail to accomplish their mission if they go ahead. While deterrence by punishment is generally linked with nuclear deterrence, deterrence by denial is usually associated with conventional deterrence. See William W. Kaufmann, 1989, "The Requirements of Deterrence", in Philip Bobbitt, Lawrence D. Freedman and Gregory F. Treverton (eds), *US Nuclear Strategy: A Reader*, London, The Macmillan Press, pp. 168–173. Also see T.V. Paul, 1998, "Power, Influence, and Nuclear Weapons: A Reassessment", in T.V. Paul, Richard J. Harknett, and James J. Wirtz (eds), *The Absolute Weapon Revisited: Nuclear Arms and the Emerging International Order*, Michigan, IL, The University of Michigan Press, p. 26.
4. See Janice Gross Stein, 1991, "Calculation, Miscalculation, and Conventional Deterrence I: The View from Cairo", in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein (eds), *Psychology and Deterrence*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 36.
5. See Patrick M. Morgan, 1983, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, second edition, Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, p. 38.
6. See Lawrence D. Freedman, 1998, "Strategic Coercion", in Lawrence D. Freedman (ed.), *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 15–19.
7. See Edward Rhodes, 2000, "Conventional Deterrence," *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 19, no. 3, July–September, pp. 221–233.
8. See Kaufmann, op. cit., pp.171–173.
9. Robert Jervis, 1991, "Introduction: Approaches and Assumptions", in Jervis, Lebow and Gross Stein, op. cit., pp. 1–2.
10. See Richard Ned Lebow, 1991, "Conclusions", in Jervis, Lebow and Gross Stein, op. cit., pp. 203–210.
11. It may be more appropriate to use the terminology of the age (the 1960s), where stability in superpower rivalry was believed to owe much to the existence of a "delicate balance of terror", so labelled after the work of Albert Wohlstetter, a leading strategist with the RAND Corporation. See Albert Wohlstetter, 1989 (first published 1958), "The Delicate Balance of Terror", in Philip Bobbitt, Lawrence D. Freedman and Gregory F. Treverton (eds), *US Nuclear Strategy: A Reader*, London, Macmillan Press, pp. 143–167.
12. The exception is, of course, so-called "rogue states". However, even if rogue states are a cause for serious concern because of their WMD ambitions, the threat that they pose is still considered as one that can be handled. In such cases, the major premises of the classical theory of deterrence are likely to prove successful. For instance, it is widely agreed among security experts that one reason why the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein did not attack Israel with chemical or biological weapons during the Gulf War in 1991, despite being believed to have such a capability, was that he was deterred by the clear threat from the United States that he would be attacked with nuclear weapons in return.
13. Such views were expressed by high-ranking military and diplomatic officials during informal conversations at the sidelines of the annual conference on disarmament matters organized by the (then) Defense Special Weapons Agency of the Pentagon in June 1998, Norfolk, VA.
14. President George W. Bush, "President Welcomes President Chirac to the White House", 6 November 2001, at <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-4.html>.

15. For details see *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, at <www.gpoaccess.gov/911>.
16. For further details see NATO's web site at <www.nato.int>.
17. The NATO Centre of Excellence – Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT), which was established in Ankara, Turkey in June 2005 under the auspices of the Turkish General Staff, convenes courses, panels, workshops and symposiums that are also attended by middle- and high-ranking civil and military officials from countries including Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. See <www.coedat.nato.int>.
18. For more information, see NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative web site at <www.nato.int/ici/home.htm>.
19. In September 2003, 11 countries agreed to and published the PSI Statement of Interdiction Principles, which identify specific steps for effectively interdicting WMD shipments and preventing proliferation facilitators from engaging in this deadly trade. The PSI is part of an overall counter-proliferation effort intended to apply intelligence, diplomatic, law enforcement and other tools to prevent transfers of WMD-related items to countries of concern. See <www.proliferationsecurity.info>
20. United Nations Security Council resolution 1540 (2004), 28 April 2004, UN document S/RES/1540 (2004), paragraphs 8–10.