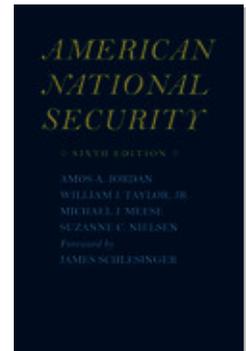




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American National Security

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Jordan, Amos A. and Taylor, Jr., William J. and Meese, Michael J. and Nielsen, Suzanne C. and Schlesinger, James. *American National Security*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.<http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

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Asymmetric Conflict, Terrorism, and Preemption

Perhaps the most significant development in U.S. national security in the past decade has been a broad recognition of the significant way in which terrorism can threaten U.S. national security. Instead of challenging U.S. military strength directly, terrorists and other adversaries can use asymmetric means to exploit U.S. weaknesses and to gain strategic political objectives. While the concepts of asymmetry and terrorism have increased in importance, the basic idea is far from new. Writing more than two thousand years ago, military theorist Sun Tzu argues that “an army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strengths and strikes weaknesses.”¹ By focusing on specific vulnerabilities and avoiding strengths, a much weaker enemy can inflict extraordinary damage.

In the modern era, the greatest danger faced by the United States stems from the nexus of two forms of asymmetry: technological and organizational.² A *technological* asymmetric threat uses unique technologies in innovative ways either to disrupt conventional military organizations, or to target other specific technological, social, economic, or political vulnerabilities of an adversary. Adversaries that use unorthodox organizational structures and techniques to circumvent the military power of an enemy represent *organizational* asymmetric threats.

After September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush argued that the most dangerous threat to the United States was asymmetric when he said it stemmed from a terrorist organization or rogue state willing and able to strike directly at the U.S. population with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Although estimates of the probability of this scenario vary, policy makers deemed the threat dire enough to warrant a complete rethinking of U.S. strategy (see Chapter 3). One of the most significant consequences has been the adoption of preemption as

a strategic response to asymmetric threats. In examining the irregular challenge of terrorism and the catastrophic challenge of WMDs, this chapter focuses on the upper left and upper right quadrants of the national security challenges chart used by defense planners and explained near the end of the previous chapter (see Figure 13.2).

Asymmetry

The first official U.S. use of the term *asymmetry* was in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). This document provides a practical definition of asymmetrical threats and an explanation for why adversaries would seek to develop such capabilities:

U.S. dominance in the conventional military arena may encourage adversaries to use . . . asymmetric means to attack our forces and interests overseas and Americans at home. That is, they are likely to seek advantage over the United States by using unconventional approaches to circumvent or undermine our strengths while exploiting our vulnerabilities. Strategically, an aggressor may seek to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States, using instead means such as terrorism, NBC [nuclear, biological, and chemical] threats, information warfare, or environmental sabotage to achieve its goals. If, however, an adversary ultimately faces a conventional war with the United States, it could also employ asymmetric means to delay or deny U.S. access to critical facilities; disrupt our command, control, communications, and intelligence networks; deter allies and potential coalition partners from supporting U.S. intervention; or inflict higher than expected U.S. casualties in an attempt to weaken our national resolve.³

One of the critical elements identified by the QDR is that adversaries will resort to asymmetric tools because of American conventional military strength. Despite the fact that potential U.S. competitors, such as China, have made vast improvements in their conventional militaries, the United States retains the most capable conventional military forces. Indeed, George W. Bush made dissuading other states from seeking to challenge the United States in a symmetric fashion part of his 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS).⁴ U.S. conventional dominance confers numerous advantages for American national security policy, but it also means that adversaries will seek asymmetric means to challenge U.S. power.

Technological Asymmetry. The Defense Department's 1997 QDR identifies terrorism and WMDs as key asymmetric threats facing the United States, but the U.S. defense community was not immediately reoriented toward these particular threats. Instead, the asymmetric threats that the U.S. defense community focused on before 9/11 were those to American advanced command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C⁴ISR) capabilities. The QDR report states:

Areas in which the United States has a significant advantage over potential opponents and increasing capabilities (e.g., space-based assets; command, control, communications, and computers; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) could also

involve inherent vulnerabilities that could be exploited by potential opponents (e.g., attacking our reliance on commercial communications) should we fail to account for such challenges. Dealing with such asymmetric challenges must be an important element of U.S. defense strategy, from fielding new capabilities to adapting how U.S. forces will operate in future contingencies.⁵

Increased attention to U.S. technological vulnerability in the realm of information technology was appropriate, even though—in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks—it was clearly overly narrow.

Networked information systems not only are essential to the functioning of today's U.S. armed forces but also are critical infrastructures for the functioning of society and government. Such critical infrastructures include public and private networks that provide telecommunications services, financial services, transportation, water, energy, and even emergency services. These systems have greatly increased economic growth, improved quality of life, and enhanced U.S. national security capabilities, but they have also created important vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities were recognized by the administration of President Bill Clinton, who began focused U.S. government efforts to redress them with his 1998 Presidential Decision Directive 63 on critical infrastructure protection. Such efforts require the support of government actions at all levels as well as close cooperation between the public and private sectors, because the majority of U.S. critical infrastructure rests in the hands of the private sector.⁶ The challenge of information security in many ways reflects other forms of warfare; in *cyber warfare*, there is a daily interaction between attackers and defenders and a constant evolution in tactics, techniques, and procedures.⁷

Technological asymmetry comes in a variety of forms. It might be a unique military technology that confers an overwhelming advantage or even a low-tech method for destroying or disrupting a U.S. technological advantage. Possible strikes against U.S. space-based assets, the ballistic missile threat from North Korea, and China's ability to deny U.S. Naval assets access to the Taiwan Strait with shore-based cruise missiles are all readily conceivable examples. State adversaries almost certainly would attempt to exploit potential vulnerabilities that could substantially degrade U.S. conventional dominance in a future conflict. Iraq's attempt to disrupt U.S. precision-guided bombs—with electronic jammers and smoke from oil fires—during the early stages of the 2003 invasion is an example of a failed asymmetric effort to disrupt U.S. capability.

In the 1990s, U.S. planners became increasingly concerned about the threat posed by WMDs because of three post-Cold War developments. The first was the 1994 nuclear crisis with North Korea (see Chapter 18). The second was the fear that former Soviet states had not kept a close eye on old Soviet weapons stockpiles, technology, and scientists (see Chapter 22). The third was the ongoing, active containment of Iraq and the numerous United Nations missions to discover and dismantle its weapons programs (see Chapter 20). Though the United States has its own vast WMD capabilities, the possession and possible use of such weapons by an adversary can pose an asymmetric threat to the United States,

because the various constraints on their potential use by American forces would likely rule out a symmetric response.

In the cases of North Korea and Iraq, U.S. policy makers were particularly concerned that states with weak conventional military capabilities would turn to nuclear weapons as a technological equalizer. That concern was seemingly justified when North Korea claimed to possess nuclear capability as a way of bolstering its position in the world and finally conducted a nuclear test in 2006. Policy makers were also concerned that terrorists would gain access to WMDs, either via transfer from a state or through the acquisition of a weapon or technology on the international black market. A terrorist group with nuclear weapons raised an entirely new set of concerns for U.S. planners because of the uniquely asymmetric characteristics of terrorist organizations.

Varieties of WMDs. While the term *WMDs* is useful shorthand for describing nonconventional weapons, it also has the unfortunate effect of aggregating numerous weapon types in a single category and obfuscating the actual variability in the nature and impact of these weapons. The term *CBRN*—which delineates Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear weapons—is more descriptive and useful than *WMDs*. In addition to an unusual level of destructiveness, these weapons have in common the fact that they have been rarely used and have unique psychological impacts on the target population.

The effects of CBRN devices can be quite varied. Whereas a full-size nuclear device might kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people immediately, the initial impact of a radiological or chemical device might be comparable to a conventional explosive. The impact of a biological attack could be even more varied; some modes of such attacks—such as the anthrax letters that were sent in the U.S. mail system in late 2001—have very localized effects. However, a different delivery system could have transformed a similar agent into a weapon that could kill hundreds or thousands of people. The common characteristic is that, if effectively employed, CBRN weapons can have a devastating psychological effect that reaches well beyond their immediate destructive power.

Within this chapter, references to WMDs are intended to connote high-impact events: a nuclear detonation or devastating chemical, biological, or radiological attack. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering the ambiguity of the terminology. Not all WMDs are particularly destructive, nor are all technologically asymmetric attacks necessarily deadly.

Terrorists and WMDs. In addition to how U.S. policy makers view WMDs, it is important to understand the enemy's perspective. While al-Qa'ida is discussed in detail later in this chapter with regard to WMDs, al-Qa'ida leaders recognize that WMDs are different from conventional weapons, and they do not take the decision to use WMDs lightly. Using such weapons would have serious theological and strategic implications. A Saudi cleric, Naser bin Hamad al-Fahd, has issued a *fatwa* (a religious opinion written by a wise man) that

justifies the use of WMDs against the West.⁸ Al-Fahd justifies the use of WMDs in the right circumstances with the following rationales: The prophet (Muhammad) used catapults in the seventh century (which also killed indiscriminately); destroying an enemy's territory is acceptable "if the fighting requires it"; killing women and children as collateral damage is permissible while striking a legitimate target; only Sharia law applies to Muslims and not international law, which would prohibit such attacks; the United States already has used WMDs against Japan; and everything in Islam should be done to the best of one's ability—including killing. While this fatwa faces some challenges from other Sunni clerics, it does provide an idea of the extent of consideration and justification to use WMDs. Osama bin Laden argues that Muslims have an obligation to develop WMDs as a means of defense against the West.⁹ Numerous other al-Qa'ida leaders have since made reference to this fatwa and the use of WMDs, including nuclear weapons, leaving little doubt that they would use them if circumstances permitted.

Organizational Asymmetry. Despite their recognition of asymmetrical threats, U.S. planners may have historically underappreciated the danger posed by organizational asymmetry. Organizational asymmetric threats are not designed to use or exploit unique technology to defeat the U.S. military. Rather, they are largely focused on circumventing U.S. strength through the creation of organizations that are difficult to detect and disrupt. Organizational asymmetry may also limit the American ability to wage war militarily by degrading the U.S. population's will to fight or denying the U.S. allies. Organizational asymmetry is designed to produce three advantages, listed below.

Surprise. Organizational asymmetry is invariably designed to allow a weaker enemy to attack a critical target without being interdicted or detected beforehand. Thus, organizational asymmetry creates a difficult intelligence problem. By avoiding detection, asymmetric forces can strike in any number of locations against numerous targets with little or no warning. As the weaker force, surprise is often the only factor that allows tactical success.

Escapability. Innovative organizational techniques not only allow an adversary to attack without warning, but they make it more difficult to find, track, and punish those responsible for committing violent acts. In traditional guerilla warfare, this often means hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, and the use of remotely detonated weapons.

Deniability. A quick attack and quick escape also prevent the target force from accurately identifying who organized and implemented an attack. This can be useful for states looking to affect a situation covertly, because they do not want their enemy or a third party to be aware of their involvement. Nonstate actors use the

same general principle to limit their enemy's ability to respond to the group with overwhelming force.

Forms of Organizational Asymmetry. Today, the challenges created by organizational asymmetry are most evident in terrorist groups, but this is not the only place they are found. States also develop asymmetric capabilities, from special forces teams to integrated command structures, such as that employed by the Marines, which tightly links air, sea, and ground forces. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force have highlighted their asymmetric advantage as a critical strength that they contribute to American defense.¹⁰ Although these techniques are taken for granted in the United States, seen from the outside, they are organizationally and technologically asymmetric capabilities.

Terrorists are different because they elevate organizational asymmetry from an operational innovation to a strategic principle. Unlike Mao Zedong, for example, who conceived of guerilla operations as a means to stalemate an enemy while developing the tools to overcome it conventionally, terrorists often seek to circumvent their enemy's military entirely and attack the civilian population directly.¹¹ Their plan for victory is inherently political, and their attacks are aimed at achieving strategic political objectives without ever attaining the capability to challenge the U.S. military in direct confrontation. This approach harkens back to Sun Tzu, who argues that "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."¹²

Terrorists use their limited military means in specific ways to attack the strategies of their enemies. Unable to overcome those enemies directly—or, unlike Mao, unable to conceive of developing the military capacity to do so—they must find ways to subdue their enemy without directly confronting their enemy's army. A terrorist group uses organizational asymmetry to overcome qualitative and quantitative weaknesses. One way they do this is to organize in ways that make them difficult to detect and track, as discussed above. But terrorists also gain an asymmetric advantage by using their disadvantaged position to justify virtually any level of brutality, including massive attacks against civilian targets.

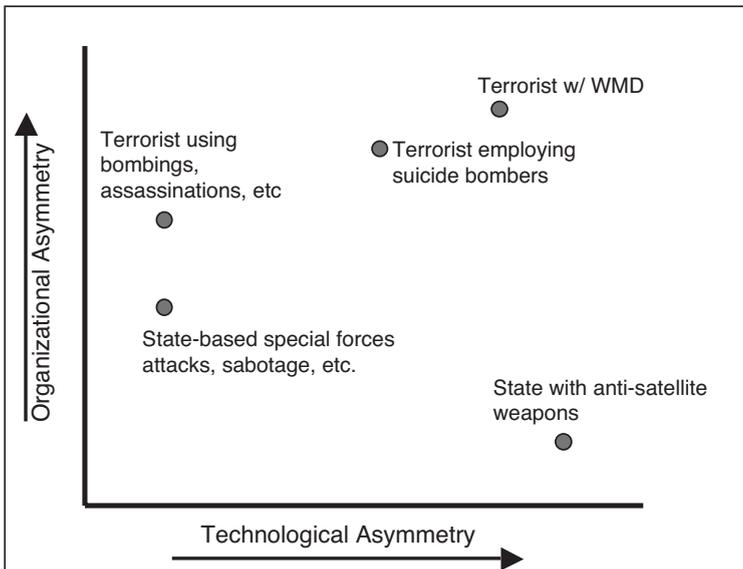
It is important to understand the moral dimension of organizational asymmetry, because it helps frame all sorts of behavior commonly linked to terrorism, from attacks against civilians to the beheadings of captives. The moral aspect of asymmetry is more than just the willing brutality of some terrorist groups; it also stems from limitations that American society puts on its government. From restrictions on torture and demands that prisoners be given trials to the uproar over surveillance programs that incorporate lesser protections for civil liberties, American society sets moral parameters that limit the government's freedom of action. Virtually all states operate within moral parameters of some kind, shaped either by their values or by the need to justify the appropriateness of their cause. Indeed, these basic parameters have become entrenched not only in national life but in the agreements the United States uses to govern its interaction with other states.

Because these restrictions do not operate on terrorists in the same fashion, the moral parameters of a targeted society create seams that terrorists attempt to

exploit. These seams are not limited to military affairs; rifts in society, demographics, political culture, and bureaucratic organizations also become exploitable. This dynamic sets up one of the fundamental challenges of counterterrorism for a liberal democracy, such as the United States: It must seek effectiveness against terrorists while preserving the values and institutions that are intrinsic to the American way of life.

Technological and Organizational Asymmetries Combined. While technological and organizational asymmetries can individually be challenging, when combined they can produce a result that is, indeed, catastrophic and pose a significant threat to U.S. policy. As reflected in Figure 14.1, various combinations of technological and organizational asymmetry compose varying levels and types of threats. In some cases, states can achieve technological advances that are disruptive to U.S. defense policy and require technological, political, or diplomatic responses. Alternatively, terrorists can threaten the U.S. by combining their organizational asymmetry with relatively unsophisticated technology. This was exemplified with the skyjacking of various airliners, the seizure of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship, and the bombing of relatively soft U.S. military targets in the 1970s and 1980s. These terrorists can be pursued with U.S. technology, intelligence, and law enforcement, much as they had been pursued prior to the 9/11 attacks. If terrorists are able to combine technological asymmetries with their inherent organizational asymmetries, they can have the capacity to inflict devastating harm on the United States or other targets of their aggression. The

FIG. 14.1 Organizational and Technological Asymmetry



2006 NSS sums up the challenge for policy makers: “We are committed to keeping the world’s most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the world’s most dangerous people.”¹³ Countering the potentially devastating effects of terrorism will continue to be an enduring challenge for the United States for the next several decades. Before turning to one potential policy response—preemption—it is important to reflect further upon the nature of the terrorist threat itself.

Terrorism

According to the U.S. government’s official definition, *terrorism* is “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”¹⁴ This definition highlights four important characteristics of terrorism. First, the violence (or, in some other definitions, the threat of violence) is not random or arbitrary but is planned and organized. Second, it is politically motivated, so it excludes criminal activity. Third, it is directed at noncombatants—civilian targets who would normally be protected under international law. Some have used this distinction to explain that, while hijacking and crashing the planes that hit the World Trade Center on 9/11 were acts of terrorism, using American Airlines Flight 77 to hit the Pentagon was an attack against a legitimate military target. The U.S. government, on the other hand, includes the attack against the Pentagon (as well as those against Khobar Towers or the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut) as terrorism, because it considers military personnel who are off duty or unarmed as not being legitimate military targets. Finally, terrorism is conducted by groups that are subnational or clandestine and not uniformed military organizations. When military organizations conduct violent operations on behalf of a nation, that is not terrorism; it is war. In war, the internationally recognized Laws of Armed Conflict, which define when those operations are legal or illegal (i.e., war crimes), are well established.

What is interesting about the current official definition is that, prior to 2001, it previously included a modifying phrase in which terrorism was “usually intended to influence an audience.” Previously, many had believed that “terrorists wanted a lot of people watching and not a lot of people dead.”¹⁵ The rationale was that the ability of terrorists to achieve their political aims was a function of the attention and publicity of their acts. If acts could be spectacular, without killing many non-combatants, they would achieve their ends without negative repercussions that could affect recruiting members, raising funds, and promoting other organizational objectives. The deletion of this phrase reflects the recognition that some terrorist organizations today specifically aim to inflict mass casualties in their attacks.

Terrorism is not, of course, a new challenge. It has long been the weapon of the weak against the strong. In the late eighteenth century, during the French Revolution, revolutionaries used terrorism to overthrow the monarchy. In July 1946, in the Holy Land, Irgun, a militant Zionist organization, blew up the King David Hotel, killing ninety-one people, to influence the creation of a Jewish state. From 1970 to 2005, the Irish Republican Army used terrorism, at the cost of hundreds of lives, in an attempt to extend Irish rule in Northern Ireland. Palestinian

organizations have used terrorism continually for nearly six decades, again killing hundreds, on behalf of an independent Palestinian homeland. In the 1950s, the Viet Cong, seeking to extend North Vietnam's rule over all of Vietnam, systematically assassinated South Vietnam's village leaders—in front of the villages' people—to paralyze the South Vietnamese government's ability to function. These examples illustrate *revolutionary* or *national liberation* terrorism. While many people were killed in some of these attacks, most of the acts were intended to advance political causes and affect the society well beyond killing individuals in a particular attack.

A second type of terrorism, *state-sponsored* terrorism, has been an important feature of international politics during the past several decades. Adopted as a national policy by a variety of states, such as Libya, North Korea, and Iran, governments of sovereign states have, at different times, funded, explicitly supported, and to some extent influenced the activities of terrorists groups. State-sponsored terrorism has the potential to spread more widely if Islamic extremists succeed in their efforts to take over governments in predominantly Muslim countries.

In just the past few decades, a more deadly variant of terrorism has appeared that might be called *hyperterrorism*, which seeks not to inflict calibrated damage but instead to maximize death and destruction. A prime example is the now disbanded religious cult named Aum Shinrikyo, or "Supreme Truth." Centered in Japan, with numerous branches elsewhere, it burst upon the world's consciousness when its followers released its own manufactured deadly sarin gas in Tokyo's subway system in 1995. Its delivery method was extremely crude, but it nevertheless managed to kill a dozen people and sicken at least one thousand others.

Al-Qa'ida, discussed below, is the current prime example of an organization that deliberately seeks to produce high-casualty attacks.¹⁶ Even if U.S. authorities did not recognize early the intent to cause massive deaths, this goal was clearly indicated in al-Qa'ida's 1993 plot to bomb the World Trade Center and its 1995 plot to bomb twelve airliners over the Pacific Ocean. In December 2004, one of al-Qa'ida's senior strategists, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (Mustafa Setmariam Nasar), published a letter arguing that if he had been involved in the planning, he would have tried to put WMDs on the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center on 9/11.¹⁷ Had a nuclear or radiation weapon or biological or chemical agents been included in the 9/11 attacks and exploded in downtown Manhattan, tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of people would have been killed. The economic and psychological damages would have been exponentially worse.

As the example of Aum Shinrikyo suggests, widely varying types of terrorist organizations may develop over the next several years. Given the asymmetric threats that they pose and the pressures of resource constraints, poverty, globalization, and religious extremism, the number of distinct terrorist groups may well increase in the future. Nevertheless, the most significant and most dangerous current group, which will affect U.S. policy for at least a generation, is al-Qa'ida. Just as it was essential during the Cold War for policy makers to understand the ideology, history, background, and thinking of the Soviet Union, it is equally important today for policy makers to fully understand al-Qa'ida. While a complete

discussion of al-Qa'ida would take an entire book (the best books on the topic are listed at the end of this chapter), the following brief description provides some of the most important information.

The Nature of the Al-Qa'ida Threat. The United States and its allies currently confront a global Islamist insurgency that “seeks to overthrow the status quo through subversion, political activity, insurrection, armed conflict, and terrorism.”¹⁸ Al-Qa'ida is often viewed as a monolithic terrorist organization. However, due to U.S. successes in Afghanistan as well as continuing sources of radicalization, al-Qa'ida has evolved since 2001 from a relatively cohesive regional organization to a complex, decentralized global movement. According to leading expert Bruce Hoffman:

Al-Qa'ida thus exists more as an ideology than as an identifiable, unitary terrorist organization. It has become a vast enterprise—an international franchise with like-minded local representatives, loosely connected to a central ideological and motivational base, but advancing the remaining center's goals at once simultaneously and independently of each other.¹⁹

While most Westerners ambiguously refer to this entire movement as al-Qa'ida, Hoffman argues that it is useful to think of al-Qa'ida in terms of four major dimensions:

- *Al-Qa'ida Central.* This category consists of the remnants of the al-Qa'ida organization that existed prior to 9/11 as well as new players that have risen through the organization to replace leaders that have been killed or captured. Experts believe these individuals reside primarily around the Afghanistan and Pakistan border and continue “to exert actual coordination, if not direct command and control capability, in terms of commissioning attacks, directing surveillance, and collating reconnaissance, planning operations, and approving their execution.”²⁰
- *Al-Qa'ida Affiliates and Associates.* This category consists of “formally established insurgent or terrorist groups that over the years have benefited from bin Laden's largesse and/or spiritual guidance and/or have received training, arms, money, and other assistance from al-Qa'ida. Bin Laden has attempted to gain support and assistance from these groups by co-opting their local agendas and redirecting their attention and efforts toward the global jihad.”²¹ Associated groups are operating in places that include Uzbekistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines.
- *Al-Qa'ida Locals.* This category consists of “dispersed cells of al-Qa'ida adherents who have or have had some direct connection with al-Qa'ida—no matter how tenuous or evanescent.” These individuals have had some prior experience with terrorism in such places as Algeria, the Balkans, or Chechnya, or they were recruited locally, brought to Pakistan for training, and then returned home with the plans for an attack and the ability to conduct it. Al-Qa'ida locals can be active or dormant, and their targeting choices may be specifically directed or left to the local terrorist cell.²²

- *Al-Qa'ida Network*. This fourth and final category consists of “home-grown Islamic radicals” around the world who have no direct connection with al-Qa'ida, but who are nonetheless prepared to conduct attacks in support of al-Qa'ida's goals. An example includes the Hofstad Group in the Netherlands.²³

To understand how the United States and its partners have come to face such a formidable and diverse enemy, it is important to understand the origins of al-Qa'ida and why it began to target the United States.

The Origins of Al-Qa'ida. It is a great irony that two of the greatest perceived successes of U.S. foreign policy in recent decades—the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the 1991 eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait—played key roles in the development of al-Qa'ida and the Islamist terrorism that currently threatens the United States.²⁴ As will be discussed in Chapter 19, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, the United States responded by supporting the local *mujahideen* resistance. Through the provision of money and weapons to the Afghan fighters, the United States sought to weaken the Soviets and reduce Soviet influence on the immediate periphery of the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.

As the Afghan War progressed, a number of Arabs—known as “Afghan Arabs”—came to Afghanistan to assist the Afghan fighters against the Soviets. These fighters came from countries throughout the Arab world, with a significant percentage coming from Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular. Originally, these Afghan Arabs were scattered among the Afghan fighters, “functioning as morale boosters who could simultaneously teach the Afghans about Islam, aid them with education and medicine, and bring news of the Afghan jihad to wealthy donors in the Middle East.”²⁵ Between 1986 and 1987, however, this changed. Against the advice of many fellow jihadists, bin Laden decided to organize these Afghan Arabs into an independent fighting force. Bin Laden felt his Arab force could serve to motivate Muslims around the world to pursue jihad if his force were able to courageously oppose the Soviets on the field of battle. That the number of Afghan Arabs fighting in Afghanistan probably never exceeded several hundred and that they had little tangible impact on the conduct of the war did not preclude bin Laden and the authors of *Jihad* magazine from lionizing and exaggerating their exploits. By 1988, this core group of Arab Afghans came to represent the nucleus of al-Qa'ida, whose purpose was to “wage jihad around the Muslim world.”²⁶

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 emboldened bin Laden and his nascent organization. Bin Laden and his followers saw these events as related and directly due to the efforts of the Muslim fighters in Afghanistan.²⁷ In a March 1997 interview with CNN's Peter Arnett, bin Laden said the victory in Afghanistan destroyed the myth of superpower invincibility in the mind of Muslims and encouraged them to believe they could end foreign influence on their countries.²⁸ When asked about the significance of the Afghan war for the Islamist movement, bin Laden said, “The influence of the Afghan jihad on the Islamic world was so great; it necessitated

that people should rise above many of their differences and unite in their efforts against their enemy.”²⁹ Bin Laden finished his response with a statement that in hindsight makes al-Qa’ida’s later decision to target the United States far from surprising. Bin Laden concluded, “any act of aggression against even a hand’s span of this land [Islamic world] makes it a duty for Muslims to send a sufficient number of their sons to fight off that aggression.”³⁰

Why Al-Qa’ida Began to Target the United States. One reason that bin Laden and al-Qa’ida began to target the United States in the 1990s may be that their efforts to change the status quo by attacking the “near enemy”—regimes viewed as insufficiently Muslim within the Middle East—were not successful. However, the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia undoubtedly also significantly influenced this change of approach.

In August 1990, a few months after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Hussein invaded Kuwait, threatening Saudi Arabia and its vast oil resources. Emboldened by his success in Afghanistan, bin Laden offered to provide thousands of fighters to oppose Hussein.³¹ The Saudi regime rejected bin Laden’s offer and instead turned to the United States and the international community for assistance. Within a few months, the U.S. military presence went from fewer than seven hundred military personnel in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) combined to five hundred thousand military personnel in Saudi Arabia.³² This introduction of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in the region represented a dramatic turning point. Bin Laden and many others viewed it as a historic development that threatened the most sacred land of Islam.

As early as 1994, bin Laden publicly denounced the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia. He followed these initial public condemnations with a message in 1996 entitled “Declaration of Jihad.” Bin Laden explained:

[T]he greatest danger to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad is the occupation of Saudi Arabia, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of revelation, source of Prophetic mission, and home of the Noble Ka’ba where Muslims direct their prayers. Despite this, it was occupied by the armies of the Christians, the Americans, and their allies.³³

Two years later, in February 1998, bin Laden joined Ayman al-Zawahiri and three other Islamist leaders from Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in issuing a formal declaration regarding the religious duty of Muslims to wage jihad against American military personnel and civilians. After a paragraph of the requisite formalities, the authors immediately give their preeminent reason for the jihad against the Americans:

Firstly, for over seven years America has occupied the holiest part of the Islamic lands, the Arabian peninsula, plundering its wealth, dictating to its leaders, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases there into a spearhead with which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.³⁴

While the Afghan War served as the catalyst for the birth of al-Qa’ida, the deployment of a half million U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia inspired the nascent

organization to direct its ire against the United States. The U.S. decision to deploy U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia represented an unprecedented affront to many Muslims that swelled al-Qa'ida's ranks and inspired attacks against the United States and its interests.

This is not to suggest that any U.S. policy maker bears responsibility for the creation of al-Qa'ida or its decision to target the United States. While the United States sent generous aid to the Afghans, there is little to no evidence that the United States directly supported the Arab Afghans or had any connection with bin Laden during the Afghan War.³⁵ Furthermore, it would have required exceptional foresight to have seen that U.S. support for Afghan fighters might indirectly facilitate the creation of an organization that would later have the capacity and intent to target the United States. Similarly, U.S. interests required the United States to ensure that Hussein did not gain control over Saudi as well as Iraqi and Kuwaiti reserves. Saudi Arabia had to be protected, and Hussein needed to be evicted from Kuwait. It is difficult to imagine a reasonable scenario in which Americans, in deference to popular Islamic sensitivities, would have turned their back on years of informal U.S. security guarantees and refused the Saudi regime's request to deploy U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia. However, as the 1990s progressed and significant numbers of U.S. troops remained in Saudi Arabia, U.S. decision makers are responsible for not responding to the gathering chorus of warning regarding the hostility generated by the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Qa'ida Since 9/11. Several events in recent years have sustained and even strengthened al-Qa'ida. The claims of al-Qa'ida and its associated movements continue to resonate among Muslim populations. Reasons for this include widespread anger and humiliation regarding the U.S.-led invasions of predominantly Muslim Afghanistan and Iraq; the continued suffering of fellow Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya, and Kashmir; and the mistreatment of Muslim detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison, for example.³⁶

While a large quantity of evidence exists to indicate that these engines of radicalization continue to supply fresh recruits and supporters for al-Qa'ida, some argue that the resonance of al-Qa'ida's message is better explained by maladies pervasive in the Arab world. The 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* largely discounts the role of U.S. policy in Islamist radicalization and instead points to four factors that cause terrorism: "political alienation . . . grievances that can be blamed on others . . . subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation . . . [and] an ideology that justifies murder."³⁷ This focus on maladies in the Arab and Muslim world allows U.S. policy makers to avoid the uncomfortable necessity of analyzing the potential negative impact of U.S. policies.

The debate between those who point to U.S. policy as a catalyst for Islamist radicalization and those who point to problems within the Arab or Muslim world has raged since 9/11.³⁸ However, framing the debate in this manner is not necessarily helpful. While terrorism surely does not spring entirely from U.S. policy or from conditions in the Arab or Muslim world, both provide powerful explanations

for its continued presence. Efforts to address both are more likely to make U.S. national security policy successful in the years ahead.

Preemption: Arguments For and Against

In response to the events of 9/11 and in recognition of the terrorists and the potential for an asymmetric threat against the United States, the Bush administration made the case for a new American approach to protecting its security interests abroad. The policy—called *preemption*, or the Bush Doctrine—sketched out a proactive American defense posture that would identify and target threats before they had a chance to strike at the United States. Implicit in the Bush Doctrine was the assumption that, in the post-9/11 world, waiting for an enemy to strike before responding was irresponsible and dangerous. Although 9/11 clearly demonstrated that terrorists could cause extraordinary damage while armed only with box cutters, the events of that day also indicated that the U.S. defense and intelligence communities might some day be caught off guard by a terrorist group or rogue state armed with WMDs.

The doctrine of preemption was developed as a practical response to new security conditions and was published in the September 2002 NSS. This occurred just as the public case was being made for the invasion of Iraq, which would take place in March 2003. Not surprisingly, the arguments for and against the new doctrine were wound together tightly with the debate over whether to invade Iraq. It is important to recognize, however, that the two are not necessarily linked. Some adherents of the doctrine of preemption felt it was misapplied to justify the invasion of Iraq. Like any security doctrine, preemption describes sets of conditions when force should be used, but agreement with those principles is not the same as agreeing that the circumstances in Iraq met the standard delineated by the doctrine.

The Argument for Preemption. Preemption advocates argue that the United States has entered a new, unprecedented era in which the possible linkage of terrorism and WMDs demands an entirely new approach to national security policy. The new approach, preemption, is designed to replace the inadequate security doctrines of the past. The president made this case explicitly when he formally introduced the doctrine of preemption during a graduation speech at the United States Military Academy:

In defending the peace, we face a threat with no precedent. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger the American people and our nation. The attacks of September the 11th required a few hundred thousand dollars in the hands of a few dozen evil and deluded men. The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology—when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations.³⁹

George W. Bush's argument stressed the nexus of organizational and technological asymmetry—that in a confusing new era, small groups could possess the ability to bring a superpower to its knees.

The Bush administration articulated and defended the doctrine of preemption around three critical arguments. These arguments, which were made in various arenas during 2002, were used to justify and explain the new doctrine. Several of the arguments were intended to refute and discredit security paradigms used to safeguard the United States during, and immediately following, the Cold War. The purpose of these arguments was to demonstrate that the United States had no alternatives other than taking a proactive, preemptive approach to safeguard the nation. The arguments are:

- Terrorists cannot be deterred, because the United States cannot target what they value.
- WMDs cannot be contained, because individual weapons can be surreptitiously transferred.
- The costs of a reactive defensive policy are prohibitively high, because the impact of a surprise attack can be extraordinary.

Given these conditions, the only means for the United States to ensure its security is to proactively—and preemptively—strike at potential threats. Regardless of whether the United States in future administrations adheres to preemption as a national strategy, a close examination of each point will help illustrate the challenges that confront policy makers.

Terrorists Cannot Be Deterred. A new strategic doctrine is necessary because the past strategies of deterrence and containment are no longer effective against the current threat. Deterrence requires that, to prevent an attack, a state must be able to disproportionately harm that which the enemy values. During the Cold War, deterrence meant maintaining a nuclear weapons capability that could survive a Soviet first strike to level Soviet cities, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 17. Although the 2002 NSS asserts that many states today are inherently less rational and more volatile than U.S. Cold War enemies, they still may be deterred by threats to vulnerable infrastructure.⁴⁰

Today's terrorist threat does not fit this model. First, al-Qa'ida does not have valuable physical infrastructure or a sense of political responsibility to a distinct population. This situation eliminates the credibility of any deterrent threat, making deterrence impossible. As George W. Bush put it in June 2002, "Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend."⁴¹

Second, al-Qa'ida's operatives and leaders share an ideological commitment that values their cause over their own lives. Even if the United States can successfully find and target the perpetrators of an attack, this action may not generate a deterrent effect, because these individuals follow an ideology that values martyrdom.

Third, such terrorists as al-Qa'ida live and operate on territory ostensibly controlled by states and among populations that may not have any affiliation with the

terrorist movement. This drastically increases the moral cost of responding to a terrorist attack with annihilating force because of the large chance of collateral civilian casualties. The moral questions reduce the credibility of a threat to respond to provocation with overwhelming force.

WMDs Cannot Be Contained. Unlike the Cold War, when containment meant limiting the spread of communist governments and Soviet influence, containment today means limiting the spread of a virulent ideology and preventing the proliferation of the world's most dangerous weapons. In spite of great counterproliferation efforts (described in Chapter 17), there is no highly reliable way to prevent states or terrorist organizations from transferring and moving WMDs. George W. Bush argued, "Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies."⁴²

The A. Q. Khan nuclear network that operated from Pakistan illustrates the problems with containment in the modern era (see Chapter 19). As the father of the Pakistani nuclear program, Khan transferred nuclear technology to rogue regimes around the world, including North Korea and Libya. The Khan network demonstrates the inherent difficulty in limiting the spread of information—and potentially weapons themselves—once governments have developed such capabilities. The prospect of a government itself distributing such information is even more dangerous than a rogue element, such as Khan.

The Consequences Are Too Great to Rely Solely on Defense. The impact of a catastrophic terrorist attack using WMDs would be not only the impact of the weapon itself but the psychological cost of an attack. Once a terrorist organization gained access to a nuclear or biological weapon, preventing that weapon from being moved or used would be virtually impossible. Again, the argument boils down to an issue of intelligence: Once a terrorist organization possesses a nuclear weapon, the group would have the operational initiative, because the United States might not know that the group possesses a nuclear weapon or might be unable to find it. Again, quoting George W. Bush, "We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systematically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."⁴³

Preemption as Necessary and Justifiable. With no other viable strategic option, the potential nexus of organizational and technical asymmetry demands a much more proactive security posture. George W. Bush said as much during his seminal speech at West Point:

For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply. But new threats

also require new thinking. . . . We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.⁴⁴

The supposed irrationality of rogue states and the terrorist groups' lack of physical infrastructure mean that deterrence and containment are no longer adequate concepts. Although not nearly so catastrophic as that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, these threats have created a unique danger that makes incidents of massive destruction more likely now. The best way to prevent a massive attack would be to preemptively attack nodes of technological and organizational asymmetry before they could be fully developed and united. This strategy entails taking the fight directly to terrorist organizations around the world while simultaneously preventing so-called rogue states, such as Iran, from developing nuclear weapons.

The Case Against Preemption. Political and philosophical opponents of the doctrine of preemption began critiquing the new strategy immediately after it was proposed. Interestingly, most preemption opponents do not challenge its proponents' core assumptions about the nature of the world: that the increasing importance of rogue states and terrorist groups coupled with the spread of WMDs demand new approaches to minimize the risk to the U.S. homeland. However, critics argue that the new threats do not warrant a complete reorientation of U.S. strategy, especially when there are legal, moral, practical, and strategic problems with adopting preemption as a strategy. Exploring each of these critiques illustrates the problems facing policy makers.

Legal Arguments. Just war theory has long distinguished between preemptive and preventive strikes. This distinction is important, because preemptive strikes are often deemed legitimate under international law, while preventive ones are not.⁴⁵ In the just war literature, a *preemptive strike* is possible and legally justified against an enemy that poses an imminent threat. A clear example of a preemptive strike was Israel's decision to strike at Egypt and Syria in 1967 after they united their military commands and blockaded Israel's Red Sea ports. An attack on Israel by the Arab countries appeared imminent. Conversely, a *preventive strike* is designed to prevent a growing power from developing the military capacity to threaten another state before there is risk of an imminent attack. An example is Israel's strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. The reactor did not pose an imminent threat; the attack was instead designed to prevent Iraq from eventually developing a nuclear weapon. This attack was widely condemned (including by the United States) as being inconsistent with international law.

Critics argue that the Bush administration adopted preventive war as a principle of national strategy but has sought to disguise this more aggressive strategy by referring to it as preemptive (see Chapter 3). More specifically, critics argue that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was an illegal act of preventive war, because Iraq did not pose an imminent threat.

Moral Arguments. The moral argument is that, as the most powerful democracy in the world, the greatest advantage of the United States over its enemies is its moral authority and the legitimacy of its power. This advantage is lost if the United States adopts a newly aggressive security doctrine based on preemptive military strikes.

Historically, this view has been taken by U.S. national security policy makers themselves. When a surprise attack was considered against the Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War, it was explicitly rejected in the strategy document of the time (NSC-68) for the same moral reason: "A surprise attack upon the Soviet Union, despite the provocativeness of recent Soviet behavior, would be repugnant to many Americans. . . . Victory in such a war would have brought us little if at all closer to victory in the fundamental ideological conflict."⁴⁶ One parallel between the early Cold War and today is that the United States once again faces ideological and material threats. Actions that damage an enemy's current material capabilities may at the same time levy disproportionate costs by making an adversary's ideology more compelling to a broader audience of potential recruits, undercutting the legitimacy of U.S. power among even friendly international publics and governments. It could also legitimate aggressive military actions by other states, which could weaken international norms against using force and thus increase conflict worldwide.

Practical Arguments. Some critics argue that a preemption strategy requires extraordinarily accurate, reliable, and timely intelligence about a state's or terrorist group's WMD capability and intentions. A realistic understanding of the capabilities and limitations of intelligence suggests that consistent achievement of that level of understanding is unlikely, especially given that the problem of WMDs proliferation is a particularly difficult one. Critics also argue that such high expectations are inconsistent with the recent performance of the U.S. intelligence community (see Chapter 7). If the intelligence community could not provide policy makers with an accurate assessment of Iraq's alleged WMD programs, then that same community is unlikely ever to be able to adequately support a preemption strategy.

The case of North Korea provides an important illustration of this point. Since the United States devastated North Korea, largely through the achievement and exploitation of air superiority during the Korean War in the early 1950s, the North Koreans have focused on the development of an extensive system of underground facilities throughout the entire country. This network makes it very difficult for foreign intelligence services to have high confidence in their assessments of North Korea's military capabilities. In addition, these underground facilities provide significant physical protection. It is unlikely that all highly protected North Korean assets could be destroyed through the use of conventional weapons alone, and, even if this were possible, it would be difficult to confirm success or failure absent forcible occupation of North Korean territory.

Strategic Arguments. Strategic critiques of the preemption doctrine seek to synthesize the legal, moral, and practical criticisms to demonstrate that alternative security strategies are superior. In part, these arguments try to salvage some aspects of containment and deterrence and improve those strategies instead of adopting preemption.⁴⁷

Strategically, a preemption doctrine is more likely to be implemented by the United States unilaterally with limited international coordination and support. Critics argue that the United States does not have the intelligence, military, law enforcement capability, or other capacity to implement a proactive strategy without the cooperation of friendly governments. The moral and diplomatic costs of an aggressive security policy carry real strategic consequences because of the consequent lack of international support for U.S. efforts and the overall deterioration of the U.S. image abroad.

Some of these critics concede that there are instances when the United States should preemptively attack states that pose a threat, but they contend that raising this last-resort option into a formal doctrine has had major negative diplomatic consequences. Furthermore, by stating an intention to use preemptive strikes, the United States encourages “potential enemies to hide the very assets we might wish to take preemptive action against.”⁴⁸ Using a big stick is much more effective if you walk softly beforehand. The inverse problem is that if the United States fails to strike, as in the case of North Korea, the new security doctrine begins to appear hollow.

Conclusion

The invasion of Iraq has brought the debate over the doctrine of preemption squarely into the public’s eye. Never since the early days of the Cold War has a president so boldly engaged the public with a clear vision for the strategic direction of the United States and then implemented the strategy. Unfortunately, George W. Bush’s doctrine of preemption has been muddied by its fusion with the Iraq War and its failures. Critics argue that these failures demonstrate the fundamental flaws in the strategy, while supporters contend that an implementation failure does not condemn the concept itself.

The preemption doctrine was designed as a response to the modern incarnation of asymmetric warfare and the potentially catastrophic nexus between WMDs and rogue actors. One of the most interesting aspects of the debate over the doctrine is that it often hinges on disagreements over facts rather than strategy. Advocates on either side disagree over critical issues, such as the extent to which the United States has the capability to achieve its security goals unilaterally or whether it can achieve the degree of intelligence reliability needed to make preemption feasible. One issue on which all sides agree is that the problem is not going away. Rogue states and terrorism are here to stay. The technology that enables the creation of WMDs is only proliferating. No strategic doctrine is perfect, but there is more evidence than ever that the United States needs a clear conception of its strategic future, and the debate over preemption will have a critical impact on that conception.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the threat of terrorism today a completely new threat that requires a completely new approach, or can previous defense strategies be adapted to face this threat?
2. To what extent do the organizational structures and technological characteristics of the United States facilitate particular challenges by determined enemies?
3. What policies can the United States adopt to minimize its vulnerability to asymmetric attacks? Should those policies include new material solutions, new methods of operations, new defenses, or other solutions?
4. What are the most relevant characteristics of terrorism to national security policy makers? How have they changed?
5. To what extent does al-Qa'ida's need to provide a theological justification for the use of WMDs provide another possible means of challenging their use of such weapons?
6. Why did al-Qa'ida begin to target the United States? What are the leading sources of radicalization that continue to fuel al-Qa'ida and its associated movements?
7. Can intelligence ever be certain enough to justify preventive war?
8. When the United States decides to use force, how important are national and international perceptions of U.S. legitimacy and moral authority?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of enshrining preemption as a core U.S. security doctrine?
10. The war in Iraq is generally considered the first implementation of the preemption doctrine. What are the lessons from this case, and will they apply in all cases?
11. Have the fundamental dynamics of the world changed so much that containment and deterrence are no longer useful security doctrines?

Recommended Reading

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Internet Resources

- Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <http://ctc.usma.edu>
- National Counterterrorism Center, www.nctc.gov