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America's New Counter-Terrorism Strategy

In the ongoing process of recent American national security reforms that are commensurate to the post-WWII measures that brought us the CIA and NSC, a process which has been unravelling since the disastrous al Qaeda attacks of September 11th 2001, the latest milestone is the release of a new core policy document by the Bush White House. Published just a matter of weeks ago the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (NSCT) builds upon other recent policy documents also covered by JANES TSM, including the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (NSCWMD) and the new National Security Strategy (NSS). All of these new strategies are together meant to inform the continuing War against Terrorism – of which the Iraqi campaign is but one element – and to guide the work of terrorism prevention and interdiction as federally supervised by the new Department of Homeland Security. The following is a précis and appraisal of the NSCT.

The newest White House policy product stands at just over 30 pages in length and is generally better constructed and thought out than most similar documents. The NSCT is divided into three substantive sections: an appraisal of the modern (globalised) terrorist threat; a brief yet politically heavy declaration of how the United States will be victorious in its fight against the former; and the lengthiest section is on the sub-strategic goals and objectives of each element of the new policy. The latter section follows the American penchant for alliterative abbreviation. In this case the policy is framed in the form of four 'Ds': Defeat of the terrorist and his organisation, Denial of sponsorship, support and sanctuary, a Diminishing of the underlying conditions exploited by the terrorist, and finally, the Defence of US citizens and interests at home and abroad.

Despite this internal division to the document, it is clear from the outset that the thrust of measures recommended concern operations external to the United States, measures aimed primarily at shrinking and eventually removing the sphere of mobility of organisations such as al Osama bin Laden's. This operationalisation of the new strategy is referred to as an iterative reduction in the scope and capacity of such groupings, whereby a persistent shrinkage will eventually push their activities into the solely criminal domain, as they become localised, unsponsored, infrequent and unorganised. In other words, a state of affairs internationally under which political violence will be sporadic, weak and lacking in global networks. Echoing the consequences of events that led to the recent invasion of Iraq by US, UK and Australia forces – with the support of military elements from Central Europe – the document states that this tightening of the noose will be accomplished via old as well as new alliances the US can establish, or even without either: "If necessary, however, we will not hesitate to act alone, to exercise our right to self-defence, including acting pre-emptively (sic)....". The logic behind this stance is made clear: "We cannot wait for terrorists to attack and then respond."



Perhaps learning from the analytic criticism of previous related documents and most likely also as a result of the sobering findings of the post 9/11 post-mortems of the intelligence failure that it entailed, there is at last formal mention made of intelligence reform. The NSCT recognises the need for linguistic capacities to be brought up to levels that compliment technological intelligence-gathering capacities and the need for the US Intelligence Community to review its HUMINT assets and find ways in which to penetrate terrorist groupings.

Perhaps the most intangible, or difficult to grasp element of the new strategy is the 'D' of Diminishing the underlying conditions exploited by terrorists. Here mention is made of the renewed need to assist weak states to stabilise and develop in healthy directions. Additionally there is talk of a "war of ideas" under which the US intends to communicate globally the "wrong-ness" of terrorism and the ideas that feed it. Given the mixed way in which the Iraqi war is perceived by America's own allies, let alone certain Arab states, this may prove to be one of the hardest of the four policy 'D's.

Overall the NSCT is an improvement on prior similar documents. Of course, its strategic quality will depend on the ability of the current administration to implement its many requirements. This will be most difficult in the area most needy of change: the US Intelligence Community. Nevertheless, the road map is given. It is obvious from the tone of the document that the political force behind its ideas is great, that the commitment is sizeable. This is only to be welcomed as even the layman will agree with one of its closing statements, namely: "The campaign ahead will be long and arduous." Commitment to a sustained campaign will be a sine qua non of success. Unfortunately the NSCT sees success in terms of the "defeat of terror". Perhaps the documents framers could have made do with a less ambitious aim – such as the eradication of al Qaeda and similar organisations – for it is unlikely that even this, the world's only remaining superpower will have the capacity to eliminate a phenomenon that has been with us since time immemorial.