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# A Winning Counterterrorism Strategy

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## Overview

President-elect Donald Trump has spoken passionately about the need to bolster the [U.S. response to ISIS](#). Moreover, Mr. Trump's nominee for Secretary of Defense, Retired General James Mattis, has [notably advocated](#) for a coherent U.S. counterterrorism (CT) strategy. As the next administration continues to take shape, there is a clear desire and willingness to rethink and refine how the United States conceives of and prioritizes its actions to combat terrorism.

*A future U.S. CT strategy should include direct military action to target terrorists as well as asymmetric activities that indirectly influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorism.*

The current and future global security environment is and will be fundamentally shaped by technological and geopolitical trends. The digital age has effectively diffused power, removing it from the exclusive purview of state governments and empowering individuals. Malign actors leverage this environment to pursue their interests without confronting the United States' conventional military might. They employ asymmetric tactics and leverage networks of terrorist groups, criminal networks, lone wolf discontents, non-state actors, and state sponsors. The results are destabilizing actions and targeted violence that undermine legitimate governments and generate uncertainty in foggy, slow-burning conflicts.

## Issue

A future U.S. CT strategy should include direct military action to target terrorists *as well as* asymmetric activities that render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorism. Whereas the United States has achieved significant successes in direct action operations against terrorist cells and individual high value terrorist targets, this approach is reactive at best. There are

additional opportunities to improve the way we apply our national security toolkit in service of a cohesive CT strategy.

## Recommended Changes

*A winning CT strategy begins with a defined strategic goal for our CT efforts abroad. Identify fundamental U.S. goals and objectives. Without clearly defined goals, CT actions—even when tactically successful—will continue to garner varied results at the strategic level. Thus far, when these operations fail to achieve strategic successes, civilian leadership becomes frustrated and the American public becomes impatient. Deliberately socializing these goals creates understanding across the U.S. government, and more importantly, creates much-needed transparency with civilian leadership, the American population, and U.S. allies and partners.*

Defining a strategic goal also involves prioritizing threats, putting corresponding levels of resources and effort toward the stated goals, and explicitly raising some threats above others. This is challenging but necessary for a successful CT strategy. When no priorities are set (or all priorities are given equal emphasis), the Department of Defense (DoD) cannot effectively plan, research, train, and equip its forces, limiting its ability to proactively position itself to prevent and address future threats.

To achieve these goals, the United States must develop a CT strategy that: 1) promotes persistent U.S. global engagement, including in many countries that are not at war with the United States, 2) uses all instruments of national power, and 3) leverages the cooperation and support of foreign security partners. A U.S. CT strategy should become synonymous with a low-visibility U.S. presence in areas where U.S. forces may not have traditionally operated, but where they work by, with, and through partner nation forces.

*To execute these stated goals, the United States must develop a coherent, long-term CT framework to facilitate whole-of-government planning and coordination. Together, the end-goals and CT framework should enable planning across the U.S. government that is context-specific, focused on a particular violent extremist organization or a particular state. A recent, successful, example is Plan Colombia. It was successful, in part, because many U.S. government programs flourished due to the commitment and resources provided by Colombia, which allowed the United States to work by, with, and through Colombia's governance infrastructure. Like the*

Marshall Plan, Plan Colombia is often invoked as a model for successful U.S. government planning, cooperation, and execution, but has yet to be successfully duplicated.

A CT framework should support all instruments of U.S. national power. This means not only the most utilized sources of U.S. influence and coercion—diplomacy and defense—but also economic, entrepreneurial, informational, legal, cultural, agricultural, and medical. To recognize instability and counter it before it turns into full-fledged terrorism, a CT framework must leverage the full range of U.S. power to support and endorse stability. The majority of the burden must not be placed at the military's doorstep but equally supported by all tools of U.S. foreign policy in mutually reinforcing ways.

Providing a framework for this planning will allow all elements of the U.S. government, from diplomats to special operations forces to sanctions experts, to develop well thought-out operations that will achieve lasting, peaceful outcomes. This framework would be best executed by small groups of civilian and military experts deployed around the globe, bridging the gap between embassies and Geographic Combatant Commands. The U.S. government should seek to deploy civilian experts and diplomats with the same emphasis and degree with which it deploys the military.

*This framework would provide more effective guidance on the allocation of resources and U.S. presence overseas.* The refocused civilian-military groups would represent a persistent presence, signaling U.S. commitment to seek out and counter terrorism wherever it persists around the globe. These experts can use the CT framework to develop the right combination and ratio of military-to-civilian led efforts across the spectrum of both war and peace, including security cooperation, security assistance, building partner capacity, development, and humanitarian aid. By working with partner nations, the United States can support and advocate for stabilization where partner nations need it most.

Such coordination would demand more transparent and real-time communication between these arms of U.S. foreign policy. State communiqués, military operation orders, and sanctions reports are currently secreted up and within their respective siloed leaderships before information is shared at the highest levels. This slows decisionmaking, limits options, and creates organizations that can only respond post-hoc. Instead, information must be shared across departmental

organizations at the lowest levels, where that information can be most effective allowing for flexible and fast decisionmaking.

In the long-term, this presence can be leveraged to monitor and address destabilizing activity before it gives rise to full-fledged terrorism. Because these U.S. groups would already be deployed and on the ground, they could respond immediately, working to undermine, erode, and ultimately exhaust the influence and resources of bad actors. Doing so would require getting better at supporting and building the legitimacy of governmental institutions that provide basic needs to all its citizens and garner popular support.

*Supporting this CT framework requires more efficient organization at home.* Today, the United States' approach to defeating terrorism consists of activities and operations that do not rise to the level of major combat operations; and therefore, the majority of CT operations occur in a mission space that is shared—mainly between the DoD, Department of State, and the Intelligence Community. Since no organization has primary responsibility for success in this mission space, no organization is incentivized to optimize its activities toward these operations. The absence of well-formed command and control processes to coordinate these missions is a detriment to our national security.

The United States must focus on addressing both the result and the source of terrorism to ensure the lasting security of the American people. Although terrorism has always existed and will continue into the future, U.S. policymakers can do much to prevent these threats from existentially or convincingly challenging the U.S.'s role as a global leader. Taking advantage of these recommendations will ensure U.S. interests are maintained while vital resources are readied to defend long-term security and prosperity.

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