POLICY BRIEF

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The Pivot from Terrorism in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition

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Over the last decade, the renewal of great power competition has reshaped the global strategic environment. Assessments of geostrategic shifts have focused on the overt challenges to the free and open international order and the re-emergence of long-term strategic competition. In particular, a focus on Russia and its violation of the borders of nearby nations and its veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbours and China as a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours. The 2018 U.S. *National Defense Strategy* asserts that "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition",* by so-called revisionist powers China and Russia, "who want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model". The *Defense Strategy* frames the U.S. as "a target, whether from terrorists seeking to attack our citizens; malicious cyber activity against personal, commercial, or government infrastructure; or political and information subversion."

When he unveiled the strategy in 2018, Defence Secretary James Mattis emphasized that, "though we will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today…Great Power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security." The July 2020 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress* reiterates the view:

> *The shift to renewed great power competition has profoundly changed the conversation about U.S. defence issues. Counterterrorist operations and U.S. military operations in the Middle East, which moved to the center of discussions of U.S. defence issues following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, continue to be conducted, but are now a less dominant element in the conversation, and discussions of U.S. defense issues now feature a new or renewed emphasis…all of which related to China and/or Russia*

When unveiling his National Security Strategy in 2017, President Trump announced that "we are declaring that America is in the game, and America is going to win". Over the last three years, Trump purports that America has won against jihadist terrorists. Speaking about the removal of American troops from Afghanistan in a February 2020 press conference, Trump signaled a closure to counter-terrorism operations in the region when he declared that "We've done a great job, in the sense that we've killed a lot of terrorists, we've put them out of commission. Who knows what they would have done if we didn't do that. But it's time for us to come home." In his remarks on the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, the President boasted that, at his direction, the U.S. "obliterated his [al-Baghdadi's] caliphate, 100 percent, in March of this year."

However, ground reports were quick to correct that this is "100% Not True". According to one source, ISIS carried out more than 600 attacks in Iraq and Syria between January and May 2020, including assassinations, suicide bombings, and assaults on government targets. Ali Soufan, Former FBI Special Agent and CEO of The Soufan Group, recently stated: "ISIS is not gone. Al-Qaida is not gone. Al-Qaida is way more powerful than it was on 9/11, when it had about 400 members. Now there are probably about 40,000. And not only in Afghanistan…They are spread from the western shores of Africa to Southeast Asia."[1] Soufan also highlights that "The rise of white supremacy in the West, not only in the United States, is really alarming."[2] According to a report by The Soufan Group, "By nearly every metric, white supremacy extremism has become one of the

single most dangerous terrorist threats facing the United States, if not the single most dangerous."

Soufan explains that there is a lot of overlap between the white supremacist movement today and the rise of the jihadi threat in the 1990s, including "similarities in rhetoric, narrative, and the anti-globalist message."[3] In addition, he says that white supremacist groups have their own Afghanistan, as individuals from across the world travel to fight in the Ukraine conflict. However, Soufan astutely points out that "We are dealing with the threat in a similar way to how we dealt with jihadis before the 1993 World Trade Center bombing when nobody wanted to acknowledge that they were a threat because, at the time, they were our allies; they fought the Soviets."[4]

Contextualizing the Terror Threat

Official American policies incorporate transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorists groups and global terrorist groups, as main challengers to American defence and security, with terrorism identified as "a persistent condition driven by ideology and unstable political and economic structures."[5] With the turn to renewed great power competition, however, terrorism is receding to a second- or even third-level concern, as it was in the years before 9/11 when it was considered "a nuisance to be attended to, not a strategic threat."[6]

The end of the Cold War precipitated reductions in national security funding, which forced intelligence agencies to cut systems and seek economies of

scale.[5] A lack of funding and a Cold War mindset led many in the intelligence community to misunderstand the terrorist threat that presented itself in the 1990s and early 2000s. Al Qaeda itself was born in an era of great power competition in the 1980s when a certain cooperation with extremists was justified by the U.S. Many of the al Qaeda operatives who were involved in attacks against American interests in the 1990s and 2000s were displaced upon return from Afghanistan following the Soviet jihad. Some could not return home, and others returned influenced by people they had met while becoming close to members of Islamic extremist movements. Many were looking for the next jihad and collectively created the backbone of al Qeada.

On August 7, 1998, Al Qaeda operatives simultaneously bombed American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Later that month President Clinton responded with retaliatory missile strikes on suspected al Qaeda targets, but after this he chose to fight Osama bin Laden almost entirely in secret. This meant no sustained public education on the issue of terrorism, leaving little general understanding of the new terrorist threat and the stakes involved.[7] After the embassy bombings bin Laden was responsible for fewer than 50 American deaths. [10] The Clinton administration had to evaluate the threat posed by Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda to discern whether this was just a new and especially venomous version of the ordinary terrorist threat America had lived with for decades, or whether it represented something radically new that posed acute danger to homeland security. [12] According to one National

Security Council staffer, the threat was seen as one that could cause hundreds of casualties, not thousands.[13]

The spotlight quickly moved from the embassy bombings, thus precluding a substantive realignment of government priorities. [14] The inherent inability of U.S. authorities to move between overseas threats like the October 2000 *USS Cole* attack and domestic threats (perceived as "sleepers") like Ahmed Ressam's millennium plot left institutional boundaries that were reinforced by the structure and mandates of the U.S. intelligence community. Adding to this was the perception that domestic agenceies had the sleeper threat under control and a fragmented understanding of the al Qaeda threat. The *9/11 Commission* concluded that the threat that was coming was not from sleeper cells but from foreigners who had infiltrated the U.S. Before 9/11, foreign intelligence agencies were watching overseas for threats to U.S. interests there, while domestic agencies waited for evidence of a domestic threat from sleeper cells in the U.S. No one was looking for a foreign threat to domestic targets.[15]

Post-9/11 Threat Perceptions

The *9/11 Commission* concluded that a failure of imagination contributed to the failure of intelligence agencies and policymakers to prevent the 9/11 attacks. In their zeal to correct this failure, U.S. officials, the media, and by extension the public, developed an excess of imagination. In the crisis environment after 9/11 the perception that there were more al Qaeda operatives or sleeper cells

laying in wait gained traction and propagated fears of an enemy ready to strike from within. Anxiety and panic permeated American society, culture, and politics, shaping policies that increased military spending and involvement overseas, targeted Muslims, and molded the idea that Muslims were suspect (resulting in infringements on civil liberties).

The U.S. committed enormous resources to national security and restructured the U.S. national security architecture, making countering terrorism a top priority. According to the *9/11 Commission Report*, after 9/11 "Countering terrorism has become, beyond any doubt, the top national security priority for the United States. This shift occurred with the full support of the Congress, both major political parties, the media, and the American people." [17] However, in this era of anxiety there was an over-attention to terrorism, especially as the nature of the terror threat changed owing to several factors. These included U.S.-led global anti-terrorism operations (the occupation of Iraq has been credited as almost singlehandedly rescuing the jihadi movement [18]), homeland security measures, changes in al Qaeda's capabilities and perceptions of its ability to penetrate American security, and the rise of terrorists inspired by (rather than directed by) groups like al Qaeda.

Although a gravitational set of forces pulled President Obama deeper into an array of post-9/11 conflicts, by his second term he made a more concerted effort to reorient American policy away from a focus on terrorism. [19] In a speech at the National Defense University in 2013 Obama said: "Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist

organizations must continue. But this war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. That's what our democracy demands." Obama hoped to redraw American foreign policy priorities with an Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and prioritizing the fight against climate change. However, Obama's own priorities had to be balanced against the obligations he felt as a post-9/11 president and the Syrian civil war, the emergence of Islamic State, and turmoil in Iraq drew the U.S. into a new counterterrorism campaign. [20]

The pivot away from terrorism to an era of renewed great power competition is connected to the architecture of the international order and how it is being reshaped by "revisionist" powers. Inextricably linked to this is President Trump's fixation on "America first" and turbulant American political and diplomatic relations. Trump's attitude and approach fuels division and confrontation and emboldens extremists within the U.S. and opportunists abroad, often reinforcing negative (and too frequently misinformed) perceptions of both domestic and foreign threats.

Furthermore, the dark currents of Trump's stustained campaign to tap into America's post-9/11 fears of the "other" and frustrations with the quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq have propelled extremist views that have turned deadly at home. [21] According to Ben Rhodes, former Deputy National Security Advisor to President Obama: "Instead of reckoning with the ways that we might have gotten the response to 9/11 wrong, Trump scapegoated enemies within" and social media mainlined these

fears making America an easy mark for Russian influence.[22]

The Fluidity of Terrorism

Terrorism scholar Walter Laqueur famously wrote that "many terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country."[23] Jihadi terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State, have demonstrated an ability to evolve and influence as the threat shifted to disaffected sympathizers drawn to extremist causes domestically. This includes adapting tactics, such as using vehicles as weapons, that require little preparation, no training, or central liaison. We do not yet know how the character of terrorism will shift in an age of great power competition, and particularly in the wake of a global pandemic. National security and health security are now connected spheres of government responsibility.[24] Domestic terrorism and extremism are also intertwined within this changing global security landscape. Research indicates that extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals have potential to forge strong transnational links and networks.[25] The internet has allowed terrorist groups, including the extreme-right, to magnify and amplify their messaging, outreach, and recruitment.

A concerted effort should be made to reorient foreign policy and national security policies away from the post-9/11 over-considertaion of jihadi terrorism, particularly as the nature of the terror threat changes. However, this should not come at the expense of objective asessments about evolving threats or by creating new blind spots to persistent

realities when policymakers, despite frequent warnings, fail to recognize a danger and take requisite action.[26] Mischaracterizing and inflating the terrorist threat after 9/11 proved self-defeating to American efforts to defend against it. This cannot be allowed to happen again as the U.S. pivots its main emphasis towards major power competition.

Addressing the re-emergence of long-term, great power strategic competition with blinders that obscure the fluid nature of the terror threat will dilute threat assessments, security and defence policies, public support for policy options, and behaviours of enemies and allies. As the CRS Report indicates, "terrorists, trans-national criminal organizations, cyber hackers and other malicious non-state actors have transformed global affairs with increased capabilities of mass disruption." Add state-sponsored activity to this, especially supported by Russia or China, and it is obvious that there are many layers to the terrorist threat environment and the political backdrops that fuel and promote extremism.

Considerations

Without dismissing terrorism as a persistent problem of a past era or relegating it to a chronic nuisance, important questions to consider include:

1) How will new regions of strategic interest, innovative technologies, global health security, and climate change operate on the fluid boundary of terrorism? And how does this effect our understanding of national security threats and prioritizing those threats?

2) How will terrorism be situated as a political issue in this new era and what effects will this relegation have on how the threat is presented publically and how funds and resources are allocated to counter-terrorism measures?

3) How will the rise of right-wing extremism continue to threaten countries domestically and internationally? And what can we learn historically from the rise of terrorist groups and Western responses?

4) How will terrorists and great powers alike seize this moment of great power competition?

5) Where will potential power vacuums be created within these geopolitical shifts? And how could terrorists capitalize on them?

6) How will terrorist tactics and groups be adopted and supported by "revisionist powers"?

Terrorism cannot become another blind spot, nor should the threat be distorted and overstated. Both perceptions have led to inaccurate portraits of terrorists and extremists in the past, and must not be replicated in the future. Threats must be contextualized for both decision-makers and the public to acknowledge and confront the reality of the threat. An abrupt turn away from terrorism will undermine our ability to appreciate the layers of the threat and the adaptability of terrorisms that are continuously morphing to create and exploit "blind spots" and other political and societal vulnerabilities.

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[2] Smith, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/09/how-the-911-disinformation-campaign-paved-the-way-for-political-armageddon

[3] Joseph Hincks, "Now People Can Read the Truth': A Former FBI Agent's Memoir on the War on Terror is Declassified After 9 Years", *TIME*, 7 September 2020, https://time.com/5886572/ali-soufan-black-banners-torture/

[4] Hincks, https://time.com/5886572/ali-soufan-black-banners-torture/

[5] *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, 31 July 2020, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf, p.23.

[6] Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Sacred Age of Terror*, New York: Random House, 2003, p.220.

[7] Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*: (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p.284-285.

[10] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, New York: W.W. Norton & Coompany, 2004, p.119.

[12] *9/11 Commission Report*, p.118.

[13] *9/11 Commission Report*, p.119.

[14] Benjamin and Simon, *The Sacred Age of Terror*, p.220.

[15] *9/11 Commission Report*, p.263.

[17] 9/11 Commission Report, p.361

[18] Lawrence Wright, *The Terror Years: From Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p.191.

[19] Ben Rhodes, "The 9/11 Era Is Over", *The Atlantic*, 6 April 2020. Available Online:
https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/its-not-september-12-anymore/609502/
[20] Rhodes, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/its-not-september-12-anymore/609502/
[21] Rhodes, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/its-not-september-12-anymore/609502/
[22] Rhodes, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/its-not-september-12-anymore/609502/
[23] Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.22.
[24] Aaron Shull and Wesley Wark, "Pandemics: The Need for New Thinking on Security", *Centre for International Governance and Innovation*, 24 August 2020, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/pandemics-need-new-thinking-security
[25] *Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism*, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, United Nations Security Council, April 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTED_Trends_Alert_Extreme_Right-Wing_Terrorism.pdf
[26] This is idea of a blind spot to terrorism historically is expertly discussed by Timothy Naftali in *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.