
Kokoda Trilogy Proceedings: Towards an Effective Strategy for Countering Islamist Terror

In late 2007, the Kokoda Foundation assembled experienced strategic thinkers and practitioners from Australia and the United States to discuss key factors for success in countering Islamist terrorism. This synthesis distils the main outcomes of these discussions. Islamist terrorism is a complex linking of diverse peoples for a common purpose pursued over the long term. Those seeking to counter such terrorism need to define a realistic end state. This is achievable in the longer term but will entail a greater focus on sustainability of effort and husbanding of our collective will and resources. The struggle between Islamist terrorism and its opponents is not about winning or losing. It is about prudent risk management in a complex environment where terrorism is not the only priority concern. This approach avoids triumphalism and aspirations of victory in a traditional sense. Rather, it emphasises specific and practical measures designed to diminish attack rates, disrupt terrorist networks and their support bases, and enable our citizens to go about their daily business without fear.

In late 2007, the Kokoda Foundation assembled experienced strategic thinkers and practitioners from Australia and the United States to discuss key factors for success in countering Islamist terrorism. The following themes evolved from the discussions:

- The Nature of the Struggle
- Key Risks
- Counter-Strategy Options
- The Whole-of-Nation Toolbox
- Elements of an Effective Counter-Strategy

What follows summarises the outcome of those discussions in terms of an effective counter-strategy based on:

- What the opponents of global terrorism can realistically aim to achieve;
- How they might go about achieving that aim;
- The resources they can marshal to do so.

This synthesis concludes with an overview of practical actions that could inform implementation of the above counter-strategy.

Countering Terror: What Should We Aim For?

Opponents of Islamist terrorism need to identify its salient characteristics in formulating the aims of their strategy. In a Clausewitzian sense, Islamist terrorists generally have defined political objectives and use force or the threat of force. But the terrorist battlefield is unconventional and as much civilian as military. It includes centres of trade and commerce; transport, communication and information hubs; energy infrastructure; and educational and religious institutions.

The adversary is innovative and progressive, adeptly exploiting the high end of technology while presenting an image to the rest of the world of being largely opposed to globalisation and its benefits. Through the internet and fundamentalist websites, geographically distant actors are able to generate political effects disproportionate to the size and strength of their groups or networks. The asymmetry inherent in this conflict is unprecedented; we are witnessing the rise of 'micro actors with macro impact'.

Terrorism is traditionally a tactic of the weak, but asymmetrical and indirect means have amplified its scope and effects to levels that can threaten nation states. If we consider terrorism to be a negative by-product of globalisation, the antidote to its disconnection from global norms may be found, at least in part, in the positive elements of globalisation such as trade and investment, economic development and growth, communications, education and employment.

Islamist terrorism is underpinned by a complex web of motivations that can singly or in association have wide-ranging influence and global reach. It is far from monolithic. It is based on a determined extremist ideology with almost singular intent promulgated by Al-Qaeda and its proxies, though there are many local and regional variants in purpose and practice. It is a heterogeneous phenomenon that is irregular but deliberate in its effects. Regional franchises linked to Al-Qaeda's trans-national vision either choose to relay its messages directly or may be incited to generate their own. Some local variants have loose ideological connections and tend to be more criminal in nature and in their modus operandi.

The Islamist terrorist threat defies simple classification. It includes some or all of the following characteristics:

- A backlash against a Western-dominated world culture and economy;
- A global insurgency, or number of localised insurgencies;
- Civil war(s) between and amongst religious extremists of different persuasions;

- Asymmetric war whereby the adversary uses non-conventional means to fight conventional military supremacy, most notably that of the United States;
- Anarchism.

While terrorism is arguably a non-existential threat, a lengthy conflict can nonetheless erode domestic will, resources and international support. Sustainability is a key issue. Terrorism could also pose a strategic threat, particularly if terrorists use weapons of mass destruction or conventional weapons employed in non-conventional ways to cripple our economies and societies.

A counter-strategy must be based on realistic timeframes—probably decades—as the terrorist vision spans generations. Maintaining coalition solidarity and national resolve over these long timeframes is critical as the risk of exhaustion and attrition of our collective political will and coalition resources increases with time.

A particular risk is that the adversary might try to discredit and alienate the West and create the conditions for the establishment and expansion of a caliphate based on new terrorist strongholds. The associated risk of terrorist infiltration and expansion of ‘borderline’ societies would pose considerable challenges.

Marginal states can be exploited by terrorists, especially where there is extreme social and economic disconnection, poor governance, and weak or broken institutions and systems. Such states can cause complications for regional security and neighbouring states. Our efforts to assist borderline and fragile states can contribute to reducing this risk. Helping them to overcome corruption, crime, under-development and other vulnerabilities is vital to creating a stable and secure regional environment.

In doing so, we must remember that countering terrorism is not the only foreign policy or national security priority for our governments. Based on national interest as the key organising principle, our counter-terrorism efforts therefore need to focus on:

- Preventing further attacks, especially on our national territories;
- Protecting our territories, populations and infrastructures;
- Preserving the values of a democratic free world;
- Containing any spillover from conflicts in Muslim countries;

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- Promoting the integration of Arab and Muslim populations into the broader fabric of modern and democratic society;
 - Maintaining the stability of the international system and global economy;
 - Preserving and regaining our moral authority and credibility;
 - Building social, political and economic resilience at many levels.

The primary focus of Australia and the United States has been on the first two points so far. We would do well to widen our focus onto a more positive agenda, using positive language, to assist our cause. This issue is addressed in the following analysis of options for realising the above aims.

Countering Terror: How Should We Achieve Our Aims?

There is a broad spectrum of action that opponents of Islamist terrorism can take to achieve the above aims.

Action at one end of the spectrum stems from the belief that terrorism is the most serious global threat. Proponents of this view advocate striking at terrorists and their strongholds, including supporting states anywhere in the world, until the threat is obliterated. Direct means are most likely to be used, with full and overwhelming force. Key challenges for this strategy option include:

- The current national security 'toolboxes' of the West and other opponents of Islamist terrorism are ill-suited to this approach.
- The sustainability of efforts of prolonged intensity is unlikely.
- Maintaining public support for direct action and interventions is difficult.
- The risk of exhaustion and erosion of will is high.
- Sustained efforts by a few are unmatched by more relaxed attitudes in other societies.

While active military operations have an important role to play at the operational and tactical levels, such a strategy would be inadequate and costly to sustain.

At the other end of the spectrum is the judgement that terrorism is not a serious threat. This is a 'status quo' approach, allowing developments to take their natural course with minimal intervention or effort to change or shape the course of events. It relies on Western 'soft power' to resolve any and all issues. Key challenges for this strategy include:

- There is a real, ever-present and serious threat of further terrorist attacks.
- The effects of soft power (such as attraction, influence and persuasion) are most pronounced when combined with elements of hard power (such as law enforcement and military operations).
- Meaningful effects can only be achieved by selecting the right tools of delivery.

Much of the world looks to Western, especially United States, leadership and has certain expectations; doing nothing is not an option.

Between these extremes of the spectrum is recognition that terrorism is a significant threat that is best managed in partnership with state and non-state allies to marginalise the perpetrators and then deal with them appropriately—whether that is to destroy them or to prosecute them under criminal law.

A key theme of this approach is a strong emphasis on building local state capabilities to counter terrorism and minimising prolonged Western force deployments in Islamic states or sub-regions. It favours an indirect strategy that draws selectively on our national assets depending on the situation: it uses the best means and options available to achieve the desired effects. It allows us to pace ourselves to avoid exhaustion and is therefore likely to be more sustainable.

Such a neo-realist approach seeks to influence and shape the future environment rather than to merely react to it, and draws on multiple means to mitigate, contain and manage the problem over the long term. Key challenges for such a strategy include:

- The national 'toolbox' is deficient or incomplete. Whole-of-nation efforts are needed, with a wider range of tools and options made available to national governments.
- Greater sophistication is required of information and media-led operations.
- Expanded and strengthened coalitions are needed, including local allies whose capacities may need to be built from a low base. Western forces should take a back seat where possible.
- Efficiencies and economies-of-scale are needed in expending our efforts.

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- An intimate knowledge of cultural context and local circumstances is essential in planning and conducting campaigns.

For this strategy to be viable, national security toolboxes need to be extended to enable new capabilities and the use and adaptation of existing tools with efficiency and effect. The next section analyses what resources are available and how they might be marshalled to implement the above approach.

Countering Terror: What Resources Are Available and How To Marshal Them?

National security toolboxes will need to include the following operations and assets:

- Whole-of-nation campaigns;
- Intelligence and law enforcement;
- Military force and diplomacy;
- Information;
- Media;
- The private sector;
- Society and culture.

WHOLE-OF-NATION CAMPAIGNS

Despite existing liaison across civilian and military capabilities in government, inter-agency coordination at both strategic and operational levels that fully integrates planning across civil-military capabilities is yet to be developed in Australia, the United States or any other allied country. Establishing a national security cadre of civil-military personnel under civilian command and control would be one element of an integrated plan.

Fragile and unstable states can provide fertile ground for subversive and criminal activity, including terrorism. Our efforts to address this problem need to bring to bear all the resources available to the state, including those found beyond the state's own assets, to prevent what might be termed a 'stabilisation crisis' as seen in many parts of the world.

A focus on practical cooperation is required. In assisting fragile states that are vulnerable to external and internal threats and shocks, a key element of our focus needs to be on building state resilience through developing a range of capabilities such as in financial and economic management, trade

and procurement, public administration, human resources, and information and communications technology.

To do this well, we need to build the capacities of our counter-terrorism coalitions and have 'on tap' a wide range of civil skills, such as in health, education, construction, business and public administration. We also need to better understand local cultures and their needs; two-way education and training programs can provide a means of developing mutual appreciation of different societal norms and customs and of identifying potential sensitivities.

To be able to employ our national resources most effectively and efficiently, our responses will need to be tailored to local conditions.

INTELLIGENCE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Most operations will need to be led by intelligence and law enforcement, to seek out adversaries and to 'map the battlespace'. Such efforts need to focus on starving micro-groups of their freedom of action through denial of space, finances and safe havens, and prevent their growth by acquiring an intimate knowledge of their local environment and out-maneuvring them politically within that space. Not only do we need to work with local groups opposed to terrorism, but also with those ambivalent towards it. This may sometimes involve special operations.

We need contestability testing, critical analysis and objective methodologies designed to better understand our adversaries. This should include systems and processes for capturing information on the progress of our efforts and mechanisms to systematically record lessons learned. We must be cautious about our successes in order not to undermine our attention to longer term issues and foster any perception that the risk is automatically reduced.

The special links between intelligence-led operations and the criminal justice system are important, as is the resolution of any legislative issues concerning detention without trial and the quick and public conviction of terrorists once prosecuted (with caveats on classified information). International consensus on key legal issues such as sufficiency of evidence and the rights of defendants is needed. Necessary measures need to be reconciled with liberal democratic values and any failures acknowledged in order to restore credibility and maintain the support of domestic constituencies.

MILITARY FORCE AND DIPLOMACY

The military's approach of defining the threat elements, the adversary's intent and capability (informing our assessment of risk), and our plan of attack (action plan) is critical in campaign planning, coordination and operations. This approach nonetheless recognises that the adversary has political aims and therefore the solution to terrorism is more likely to be found in political solutions such as the denial of political space and freedom of

action, de-legitimising terrorist networks, and partnering with local communities to develop localised solutions. Military efforts alone cannot win the peace.

Sustainability is an issue for long-term engagements, particularly if high-intensity military operations are conducted. Less direct methods and flexible, scalable approaches will be needed to respond to crises that no longer fit the traditional model of state-on-state warfare. Military back-up should generally support broader counter-terrorism efforts led predominantly by law enforcement and intelligence. Military-led operations are really only appropriate in certain 'black zone' environments.

Regional and multilateral partnerships are critical to achieving results in military diplomacy as well as in broader foreign relations. Strategic use of our diplomatic assets will be important in laying the foundations of political, social and cultural understanding for positive longer term engagement with partner countries.

Public diplomacy campaigns also require clear messages borne of certainty of purpose and alignment with strategic goals, and an understanding of the recipient's sensitivities (not only of the target audience but also other likely audiences).

INFORMATION

The counter-strategy needs to reflect the ideas-driven nature of the conflict. The information campaign must therefore be an integral part of our strategy, not simply an adjunct. In some instances, the information campaign may even drive operations, though no single message or medium should be expected to fully support the range of tools needed to implement an effective strategy.

Information is a key enabler of military and non-military operations and draws on soft power assets such as our democratic values and culture (provided they are seen to be credible and non-hypocritical). Supporting legislation and resources will need to enable a strategic focus on communications, public diplomacy, image shaping and perceptions. Public communication tools and techniques can be most effectively employed at the local level, but need to remain strategically connected to the overall campaign.

Ideas and actions need to be aligned, with a view to how they are perceived by a diverse and potentially global audience. Credibility matters. When necessary, mistakes must be acknowledged in order to build and maintain community relations and trust in the truth and the validity of our messages.

Key factors to consider in an information campaign include:

- Having a localised focus;
- Understanding cultures and societies to which we direct our messages;
- Allocating appropriate resources (commensurate with desired effects);
- Maintaining these resources over time;
- Being prepared to counter disinformation (proactively and reactively);
- Optimising the use of public-private partnerships.

Terrorism derives considerable potency from its population support base. Countering propaganda is therefore essential to prevent the adversary from gaining ground through such support. A sophisticated and multi-faceted approach is needed that simultaneously constructs and conveys messages to the non-core terrorist support base and deconstructs those of the adversary. An emphasis on positive messages rather than solely on the negative can help dispel the sense of alienation felt by certain groups and shift allegiances in our favour.

We also need to be aware of the risk of defining our own 'single narrative'. The struggle against terrorism is taking place while the developing world wrestles with other important issues such as poverty, instability, corruption, repression and trans-national crime. This generates the need for a sense of proportion in countering Islamist terrorism.

MEDIA

Commercial media, whether deliberately or not, provides a means of communicating propaganda. Public confidence and trust (in government) can either be facilitated or obstructed by the media. Democratic systems can, ironically, create problems through their very transparency and accountability: this is a key point of vulnerability in liberal, open societies. We need to get the balance right between the civil liberties characteristic of our societies and our national security imperatives.

Strategic and well-considered use of language and information in the public arena can boost efforts in other domains. Indeed, a poorly considered and reactive response to terrorist activities can undermine our attempt to counter the adversary's communications, as we may risk giving more credence to their message or creating a new message that serves the terrorist's purpose. We should always consider the impact of our narrative on the adversary's cause.

It is important that media messages support, or at least not undermine, the information campaign. The media market has changed dramatically over the last decade, with a concomitant loss of centralised authority and traditional

structures. We are witnessing the 'informalisation of information', and increased individual usage and diversity of information options through the internet, podcasts, *Facebook* and variety of print media. News now needs to be both credible and instantaneous. While it is a crowded space, there is limitless opportunity to influence, for good and for bad. The media is therefore a vital part of the information 'battlespace'.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Our approach needs to be sufficiently flexible to marshal whole-of-nation assets, drawing on the expertise and resources of diverse actors such as the media, non-government organisations (NGOs), civil society and industry groups. There is a more prominent role to be played by public-private partnerships. Our counter-strategy needs to harness the vast economic, social and intellectual forces in our broader societies.

The private sector is a key stakeholder in countering terrorism. This is because:

- The success of the liberal free market presents an existential threat to the anti-globalisation message of the extremists, for whom global economic power may be a source of discontent and resentment;
- The private sector can be an alternative or additional source of intelligence—such as through its financial institutions, the internet, satellite imagery and transportation systems—as well as a source of vulnerability as a potential target;
- The sector may be an unwilling but useful source of logistical support to the adversary, such as through transport systems; personal documentation (for example, travel and identity); goods and services (employment, education, utilities and housing); and non-traditional weapons (such as hijacked aircraft and computer viruses).

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Western societies have an enormous reservoir of soft power in the attractiveness of their wealth and prosperity and in their music, art and pop culture. Similarities in popular youth culture throughout the world provide an illustrative lesson for a counter-information campaign, particularly one aimed at the younger generation. The popularity and pervasiveness of Western culture is almost universal, even in locations that appear outwardly hostile towards globalisation. It is critical to involve youth in any strategy for countering Islamist terrorism; their fluency with sophisticated technological tools represents a largely untapped reservoir of soft power.

In engaging our communities, our own perceptions are important. Maintaining a level of societal understanding and engagement will involve promoting a greater sense of social and civic responsibility. Criminalising

terrorists, instead of viewing them as ideologues, needs to be part of this strategy.

Education is critical to undermining the range of means and tactics that terrorists use to justify their actions. It can build long-term personal connections, thereby fostering cultural and social linkages between countries. The Colombo Plan which was established after World War II and continued through to the 1980s is a good example of soft power focused on human resource development through education. This program embodied the concept of collective inter-governmental effort to strengthen the economic and social development of member countries in the Asia-Pacific region. It demonstrated the positive impact of education on relationships and cultural exchanges between the region's future political, religious and business leaders.

Conclusion

The focus of most governments has so far been mainly on strategies for winning the fight against terrorism as if it were a modified version of a conventional war. However, the war on terror is not winnable in a military sense: an indirect approach is likely to be more effective and sustainable.

An indirect counter-strategy could be described as an all-hazards approach that focuses not only on the threat but also on the risks as determined by rigorous risk and vulnerability assessments. The most significant threat is likely to be that which we cannot predict, so it is important for our strategies to be sufficiently flexible to respond to emerging threats while simultaneously being able to distinguish clearly between what is a threat and what constitutes a risk. We need to ascertain the level of risk we are willing to accept. A counter-strategy that combines an appropriate balance of containment and confrontation may be the most effective and sustainable. Managing the problem as part of overall national security measures will require integrating risk management from prevention (likelihood management) to response and recovery (consequence management).

There are many practical factors that could inform the implementation of a counter-strategy based on a whole-of-nation approach. The following are particularly relevant to information operations, but also apply to other campaigns:

CONTENT

We need to clarify the core nature of the threat and be clear about what we want to achieve. For example, are we trying to win popular support (and is this achievable) or are we trying to prevent the adversary from doing so? Constructing our own message is different to deconstructing the adversary's. We need to focus on proactively countering propaganda strategies rather than simply responding to single statements. An indirect approach would

focus on shaping perceptions and depriving the adversary of the 'power of the messenger'.

Target populations and communities also need to be empowered to develop their own alternative and locally meaningful narratives to counter the terrorist's. We should draw on issues of common interest, aligning with local needs, concerns and priorities to focus on mutual benefits; that is, we should maintain a field bias.

INTENT

The development and explanation of our campaign plan needs to be connected to our political strategy. We need to understand that while our messages are often constructed for domestic audiences, the phenomena of globalisation and instant communications mean that our messages can be broadcast around the world with rapid and serious consequences (as shown by the Danish cartoon riots of 2005-2006). We need to pay close attention to the implications of our actions and carefully craft messages that will enhance rather than undo efforts in other areas. Triangulation in our communications can be of value to offset any tendency towards self-centricity.

CAPABILITY

A comprehensive whole-of-nation strategy with a clear end state for major campaigns will need to factor in the challenge of mobilising resources over the long term. This may require enhancing non-military capabilities in regard to personnel and deployability, and commensurate rebalancing of investment (budgets and resources) to match our aims. We need clear objectives, unity of effort (national, inter-agency and international) and well-trained and supported personnel.

We need to build whole-of-nation planning and command and control capabilities through an integrated strategy that focuses on unified objectives, doctrine, training and deployment capabilities. A coherent chain of command with strong civilian leadership at the head of a national security corps is envisaged. We need to be able to harness not only military and civilian government expertise, but also the knowledge and resources of educational institutions, NGOs, the media and the private sector. This flexible approach would largely draw on soft power, investing heavily in regional and local relationships and building capacity in relevant areas.

We need education, training and incentive systems to attract and retain the right personnel for a national security cadre. While the ideal model does not yet exist, examples of civil-military cooperation may provide a useful starting point. Models of civil-military cooperation and coordination could subsequently be extended beyond national efforts to multinational coalition training, exercising and operations.

AUDIENCE

It is important that we tailor regional and local campaigns to local circumstances. Differentiation, subtlety and timing of our communications are critical. They will depend in part on such factors as whether the audience is domestic or international, religious or secular, young or old, and the extent to which it is politically attuned. We need to be able to create and maintain local awareness and understanding of our objectives and actions, while remaining sensitive to other issues of concern to our local partners and allies.

Existing models of regional cooperation at the operational level, such as in law enforcement, can serve as a useful test for further cooperation. We need to embrace the willingness of regional governments to work with us without alarming their populations. The majority of communities are likely to be moderate and have an interest in not allowing radical elements to take over. In sustaining local engagement, we need to be sensitive about how and when to provide feedback to our local partners, regional governments and home audiences.

LANGUAGE

There will always be fundamentalist elements that will not respond to reasonable demands or compromise, being prepared to act only through violence. Labelling the perpetrators as criminals rather than empowering them through more emotive or hostile terms can serve our purpose through a process of de-legitimisation. The nature of the discourse about countering Islamist terrorism is important. Hence choice of language must be a deliberate element of our strategic communications. For this reason, and in order to maintain community support, there is a need for a common dialogue beyond the security and strategic lexicon. The language of public diplomacy, education campaigns and advertising is more appealing to the general public than military, foreign policy and security discourse, and would help to disband a common perception that foreign policy has become 'militarised'.

We need to play to our own strengths, not the terrorist's. Constant references to 'the enemy' can help rally our communities to a common cause, but can also alienate others. Labels should therefore be used judiciously to bring to our side those as yet uncommitted to any cause.

GEOGRAPHY

It is important to consider geographical context as part of a meaningful and sustainable campaign. Knowing the peculiarities of regions, countries and specific localities such as different tribal areas will have a bearing on the success of a campaign plan. Decentralising our messages can meet local and temporal demands and still fulfil our strategic objectives and national security interests. We need to think about how local 'wins' can be incorporated into systemic achievements that collectively have strategic

impact. Developing cultural and language capabilities in key theatres can help us to strengthen personal relationships and build trust at the local level.

Our challenge will be how to engage communities more inclusively over the long term. Attaining positive outcomes will require perseverance and sustainability of effort, including political commitment, funding, personnel and other resources to avoid attrition. A key consideration will be how to separate insurgents from their potential support base—local populations—and gain support through listening and acting upon legitimate local grievances.

A key part will be played by regional and local partnerships that can help to share the burden. Lessons learned from natural disasters such as the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami have improved coordination and forged strong links across governments, and with NGOs and local communities. It is important that we continually evaluate and re-assess operations, learning from regional models to inform future campaigns and capability requirements.

MESSAGE DELIVERY

Through coordinating with a range of partners, we can improve our means of countering the adversary's propaganda and lies. Better use could be made of our networks, technologies, partnerships and leveraging opportunities. We could be using more to our advantage the fact that information travels instantaneously and globally; the pervasiveness of our values and culture is potentially omnipotent.

We can learn from others who are adept at delivering a range of messages to the masses; this is core business for multinational corporations and media companies. Some have the expertise to do this globally, through slick and subtle advertising at multiple levels based on sophisticated market research of target audiences and the best means of delivery to meet their strategic objectives. They have global reach, and yet are also astute in making the benefits relevant, known and desired in local contexts. Others from which we could learn include foreign investors who can shape values within their markets and advertising agencies that are skilled in shaping and monitoring public opinion.

Internationally and locally, our own partnerships and networks are critical. These may include community leaders in business, religion, media and civil society. We need to consider a range of different mechanisms and forums to promote those ideas and values that are likely to be attractive to the vulnerable or impressionable. This may include targeting youth groups and activities to increase awareness through education.

TIME

It is vital to monitor the effects of our strategy and campaigns in order to learn from our experiences and tune operations. Indicators of progress and sharing lessons learned across governments will be useful in tracking progress and adjusting our strategies over time. We should not allow our successes in thwarting potentially devastating attacks to distract us from analysis of what could have been, in order to inform us about what might yet occur.

This synthesis was prepared by a participant in the Kokoda Trilogy discussions from 29 November - 2 December 2007.