

Countering Terrorism in a Period of Great Power Competition

Dr. Matthew Levitt



INTRODUCTION

At a time of sharp partisan divisions on nearly all aspects of U.S. national policymaking, one major policy shift with significant bureaucratic, budgetary, and security implications enjoys broad bipartisan support. Over at least the past three U.S. administrations, officials have wrestled with the need to reevaluate America's massive investment in counterterrorism, rebalance its military commitments from the Middle East to Asia, and ratchet up efforts to address great power competition with the likes of Russia and China. The Department of Defense started reprioritizing U.S. national security threats and repositioning military assets under the Trump administration, an effort that continued into the Biden administration, which then also ended the U.S. military's long deployment to Afghanistan. The 2018 National Defense Strategy bluntly dropped all pretenses and told it like it is: "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."¹ However, this shift comes at a time when the U.S. faces a threat landscape that is broader and more diverse than it was on September 11, 2001, requiring a reimagined and more sustainable approach to counterterrorism.

In fact, America was long overdue for a rethink of its counterterrorism posture, which itself was financially unsustainable and stood in the way of getting up to speed on great power competition, which explains the rare bipartisanship the issue enjoys. However, bipartisan support is not enough to make this policy shift effective. Through their actions, America's adversaries have a say in the success or failure of Washington's efforts to rebalance resource allocation between counterterrorism and great power competition. Today, core elements of this plan are being challenged by adversaries and world events, including the rise of authoritarianism on the African continent and crises like the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023.

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RATIONALIZING COUNTERTERRORISM

Over more than 20 years, the U.S. built a counterterrorism enterprise that proved remarkably successful at preventing another catastrophic terrorist attack like September 11. By investing heavily in counterterrorism over such a long period of time, America not only created new agencies dedicated to fighting terrorism but also systems that enabled the military and other security



Seal of the United States National Counterterrorism Center
U.S. Government | Public Domain



Evacuees wait to board a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 23, 2021. | US Marine Corps/Sgt. Isaiah Campbell | Public Domain

agencies to carry out a high rate of operations across multiple geographic areas, supported by unique collection platforms and tools. These further benefited from robust intelligence analysis capabilities that translated vast amounts of collected information into timely and actionable intelligence. But the inherent tradeoff was that all those dollars, intelligence resources, and more went to support primarily kinetic missions. Thus, two factors—widening the national security aperture to address other priority threats and making the counterterrorism mission more sustainable over the long term—now underlie the need to rationalize counterterrorism efforts. Today, the threats that demand quick, dedicated investments emanate from states like China and Russia and from emerging transnational threats such as climate change and pandemic preparedness.

The key to making a successful shift in America's counterterrorism posture, however, is finding ways to capitalize on the U.S.'s two-decade-long investment in counterterrorism, build upon gains in protecting the homeland, foster alliances to share the burden of fighting terrorists abroad, and most critically, do all this in a financially sustainable manner.

INVERTING THE MODEL

Addressing great power competition and other threats required that America reduce its sprawling military presence around the world and wind down its massive and open-ended deployment in Afghanistan. In the words of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden, "We must maintain our focus on counterterrorism, around the world and at home, but staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power."²

Most critically, shifting toward a focus on great power competition while still addressing ongoing terrorism threats required that the U.S. invert its longstanding model of a U.S.-led and partner-enabled global counterterrorism model with one that, wherever possible, is partner-led and U.S.-enabled. Such steps aimed to usher in a new U.S. counterterrorism posture, under which the United States would focus on those groups most capable of targeting the homeland or U.S. interests abroad and rely on allies to lead on intelligence collection and counterterrorism efforts closer to their own borders.³

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The explicit bipartisan agreement on the need for such a shift is telling. The Trump Administration's counterterrorism strategy declared the U.S. "must relentlessly focus on counterterrorism that jeopardizes American citizens and interests"



The burned facade of the Crocus City Hall concert venue following a deadly attack, on the outskirts of Moscow, Russia, on March 23, 2024 | Sergei Vedyashkin/Moscow News Agency/handout via Reuters

and not “dilute our counterterrorism efforts by attempting to be everywhere all the time, trying to eradicate all threats.”⁴ Later, the Biden administration pledged not to engage in “forever wars” and to “right-size” U.S. military presence in the Middle East “to the level required to disrupt international terror networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.”⁵

Making this massive adjustment in America’s two-decade-long counterterrorism posture, however, requires two things: enhanced indicators and warning (i.e., intelligence) to forecast threats before they materialize and strong relationships with allies and partners around the world.

THE INTELLIGENCE CONUNDRUM: BETTER FORECASTING WITH FEWER RESOURCES

Asking the intelligence community to provide actionable and preemptive intelligence on Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan, even as U.S. and coalition forces withdrew and the Taliban took over the country, poses serious challenges most recently underscored by the March 22, 2024 IS-K attack on a Russian concert hall.⁶ Running human sources from afar is difficult, and with

fewer drones flying missions from bases farther away, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) collection is a fraction of what it once was. By definition, shifting away from two decades of counterterrorism premised on an aggressive forward defense posture and toward one more focused on indicators and warning means assuming some greater level of risk. All the more so when many of the collection platforms previously assigned to the counterterrorism mission are reassigned to other regions and missions.

Securing a dedicated, sustainable counterterrorism budget as the Defense Department shifts to address other national security priorities is critical but not sufficient for the mission’s success. Moving the counterterrorism burden toward indicators and warning requires investment to kick-start an intelligence community modernization program and develop long overdue innovations in machine learning and artificial intelligence to address today’s terrorist (and other) challenges. As the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence noted, “AI will help intelligence professionals find needles in haystacks, connect the dots, and disrupt dangerous plots by discerning trends and discovering previously hidden or masked indicators and warnings.”⁷



Such tools are mission-critical because forecasting threats based on intelligence is an art, not a science, and despite Herculean efforts, the U.S. intelligence community has been caught flat-footed more than once. In 2009, the intelligence community considered AQAP a regional threat until Christmas Day “underwear bomber” Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab nearly blew up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit. The following year, a bombing plot in Times Square was tied back to the Pakistani Taliban, a group the IC had assessed to be a solely regional threat in South Asia.⁸ Then, in 2014, the rise of the Islamic State caught the United States unprepared. Looking back at this failure four years later, General Nagata put it bluntly: “The fact that ISIS suddenly emerged as a strategic surprise for the United States only four years ago should be a sobering realization for all of us.”⁹

Additionally, there are risks involved in relying on allies—even close and capable ones—to address threats that may not pose an immediate danger to U.S. interests, but very easily could in the near or long-term. Hamas’s October 7, 2023, invasion of Israel from the Gaza Strip took the world—including Israel—by surprise. The Israeli military reportedly had knowledge of what they considered



A propaganda video posted to X reportedly shows Hamas terrorists using fan-powered paragliders to invade Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. | X/@XTrendHunter

a notional Hamas plan, codenamed “Jericho Wall,” to invade southern Israel using paragliders, motorcycles, and foot soldiers a year prior to October 7.¹⁰ The Office of the Director of National Intelligence considered Hamas a level four priority prior to October 7—meaning it was not deemed so significant a threat as to warrant intense intelligence collection efforts—but has recently reclassified the group as a level two priority.¹¹

Today, the fallout from the Hamas attacks of October 7 has presented the U.S. with an array of acute security challenges, not least of which are the threat of a regional war and a painfully long list of American victims of the Hamas attacks. By any measure, the October 7 attacks are one of the worst incidents of international terrorism on record. Hamas operatives, aided by small numbers of terrorists from other groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, murdered some 1,200 people in Israel and wounded over 4,200. Regardless of Hamas’s framing, the number killed on October 7 is similar to the number who died when al-Qaeda crashed United Airlines Flight 175 into the World Trade Center’s south tower two decades ago: 1,385 of the nearly 3,000 deaths caused on 9/11, according to the Global Terrorism Database.¹² At least 32 Americans were killed on October 7—and 12 taken hostage by Hamas—making October 7 the single deadliest terrorist attack for Americans since 9/11.¹³



The underwear and explosive device allegedly used by Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab aboard Detroit-bound Flight 253. | FBI & AP Photos



Smoke and dust rise after an Israeli strike hit Gaza City in the northern Gaza strip. | Adel Hana AP

MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS

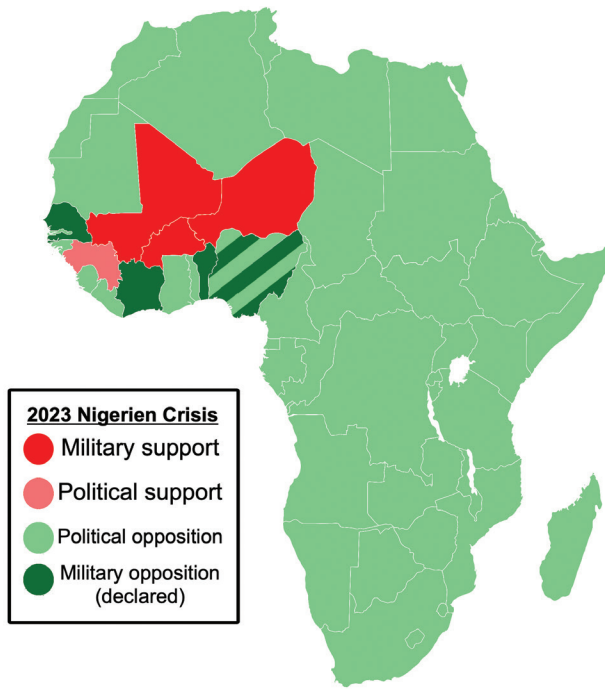
America's standing as a credible partner that can be relied upon to stay the course over a long-term partnership has taken a series of hits over recent years. President Obama's failure to follow through on his infamous "red line" over Syria's use of weapons of mass destruction led U.S. partners in the region to doubt whether America would follow through on its word in other situations.¹⁴ President Trump withdrew the United States from a laundry list of international treaties and institutions, took a dismissive attitude toward America's traditional European allies, belittled the NATO alliance, and dispensed with alliance building in favor of highly transactional and, typically, bilateral international engagement.¹⁵ Trump's policies led one European counterterrorism official to comment, "Does the Trump administration not understand that its actions in Syria are undermining our national security? We are not an ocean away from Syria; the problem is at our back door."¹⁶ More recently, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—compounded by the IS attack at the Kabul airport in the midst of the departure—led many allies to question the staying power of an American pledge to stand by its allies.

In the wake of the Afghanistan withdrawal, one European defense analyst quipped, "When Biden says 'America is back,' many people will say, 'Yes, America is back home.'"¹⁷

Key to shifting to a counterterrorism posture focused on burden-sharing and diplomacy is rebuilding U.S. credibility as a partner and ally—no country wants to sign a treaty with a country it doesn't believe will hold up its end of the bargain. This has led U.S. allies in the Gulf to hedge their



President Donald J. Trump meets with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during a one on one meeting Tuesday, Dec. 3, 2019, at Winfield House in London. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead) The White House from Washington, DC | Public Domain



Political situation in Africa following the 2023 Nigerien coup. (All support and opposition is towards Niger)
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bets and develop relationships with Russia and China even as they seek to broaden ties to the U.S.,¹⁸ but nowhere has the impact been more pronounced than in Africa.

Prior to the July 26, 2023, military coup d’etat in Niger, the country played a major role in the Global Coalition Against the Islamic State by hosting a U.S. drone base crucial to counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. Niger’s military junta put an end to the country’s military relationship with the United States on March 16, 2024, and described the American military presence in Niger as “illegal.”¹⁹ Speaking at a Washington Institute event held several weeks after this decision was announced, the U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to

the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Ian McCary, described the loss of Niger as a coalition partner as a “challenge.”²⁰ Niger now joins two other Sahel countries ruled by military dictatorships—Mali and Burkina Faso—placing legal restrictions on the Coalition’s ability to provide counterterrorism assistance to some of the region’s highest-risk countries. The situation in these three countries also highlights the challenges placed on the United States by great power competition; Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have all tightened their military and economic ties with Russia in recent years, with Niger even feeling out a relationship with Iran.²¹

The United States needs to “do stuff,” as the truism goes, to get allies to participate in and contribute toward alliances. This means leading on some counterterrorism lines of effort and supporting on others. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged, U.S. allies “raise the questions of the durability of some of the actions we’re taking,” and the only effective answer to those questions is U.S. actions, not words.²²

GETTING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Beyond addressing the counterterrorism intelligence shortfall and rebuilding credibility among partners and allies, movement on two key issues could help transition the U.S. national security posture to better balance counterterrorism and great power competition.

First, Washington needs to better address the challenge of proxy groups. Interstate strategic power competition today is increasingly manifested in the use of militant and terrorist proxies, as events in the Middle East have made abundantly clear in

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The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Carney (DDG 64) defeats a combination of Houthi missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles in the Red Sea, Oct. 19. Carney is deployed to the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations to help ensure maritime security and stability in the Middle East region. | U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Aaron Lau | Public Domain

the post-October 7 world. Hamas' incursion into Israel from the Gaza Strip and the war that ensued unleashed a new wave of violence drawing in a wide variety of actors—Hezbollah firing missiles across Israel's northern border, the Iranian-backed Islamic Resistance in Iraq targeting U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi movement in Yemen threatening global shipping.

But the problem long predated these most recent events. Consider the extensive role of Shia militias in Syria acting as proxies for Iran and Russia,²³ Shia militias operating as Iranian proxies in Iraq,²⁴ Russian mercenaries fighting in Libya with Russian logistical support,²⁵ or reports of Russian offers of bounties to Afghan militants to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan.²⁶ Separatist rebels in Ukraine used advanced weaponry they received from Russia,²⁷ while Iran enabled the Houthis in Yemen to deploy surface-to-surface missiles, precision-guided anti-ship missiles, and weaponized drone swarm attacks.²⁸ Any effort to address Iran's aggressive regional activities will have to contend with Tehran's asymmetric warfare in the gray zone between war

and peace.²⁹ Pushing back on Russian and Chinese adventurism around the world will include areas of operation where counterterrorism tools and partnerships can play critical roles in a broader interstate competition.

Second, Washington needs to invest more in efforts to get ahead of emerging threats. Failure to pay attention to the threats not imminently jeopardizing U.S. citizens and interests—like Hamas pre-October 7—increases the odds of failing to forecast those threats coming around the bend. Even within a rationalized counterterrorism posture, America must be able to address developing regional threats to prevent their growth into global threats targeting U.S. interests. Recall, for example, that President Barack Obama dismissed the Islamic State as the “junior varsity squad,” in comparison to al-Qaeda, just six months before the group seized territory the size of Britain spanning parts of Iraq and Syria.³⁰ America failed to foresee the IS threat, and then had no choice but to create a global coalition to inflict battlefield defeat upon the group.



U.S. Marine Corps Marines remain watchful for insurgents while foreign reporters gather information for their news stories inside a bloody basement in an unmarked Islamic Resistance—DPLA | The original finding aid described this photograph as: Base: Fallujah State: Al Anbar Country: Iraq (IRQ) Scene Camera Operator: CPL Theresa M. Medina, USMC | Public Domain

More recently, just days before the October 7 attacks, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that “the region is quieter than it has been for decades.”³¹ This is clearly no longer the case, and as much as the American public may not like it, our adversaries get a say in our country’s foreign policy. They decide when the U.S. foreign policy apparatus enters ‘crisis mode,’ but they do not decide how we prepare for those situations years in advance and rework our current policies to make us more responsive in a crisis.

“America must be able to address developing regional threats to prevent global threats targeting U.S. interests.”

CONCLUSION

The U.S. government has limited funds, personnel, and resources to address an ever-growing list of national security priorities ranging from global

pandemic readiness and response to climate change to terrorism. But the October 7 Hamas attacks underscore the fact that while rebalancing resources towards great power competition, the United States must still be prepared to forecast threats. Doing so with limited resources is a tremendous challenge, which demands investment in IC counterterrorism capabilities, including machine learning and AI technologies. Even as new security threats emerge—from global pandemics to aggressive great powers—the U.S. must be prepared to deal with a more geographically dispersed and ideologically diverse threat landscape.

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Smoke billows from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted the southern Lebanese village of Khiam near the border with Israel on 25 June 2024 (RABIH DAHER / AFP)
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