

The logical deduction of this process is that against the evolving nature of an increasingly global and interconnected terrorist threat, an “across the board” approach to fighting terrorist networks becomes both sensible and necessary. Broad international counterterrorist alliances become part of the solution. Defining NATO’s own role in countering terrorism becomes a compelling need.

Evolution of the Transnational Terrorist Threat

Today, terrorism has become more dispersed, decentralized, and multifaceted. In a word, it has become complex. One can adopt a “methods and motives”³ approach or attempt to make a distinction between national and international terrorism and still not be able to define a single framework to capture all aspects of the challenge. As a direct consequence of al Qaeda’s attacks on the United States, NATO’s involvement with countering terrorism has focused on its international dimension “over and above” national efforts and beyond national borders.

Well before the demise of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, experts concurred that there was no longer a wide global network run directly by al Qaeda. Thanks also to the successes in disrupting its leadership and network, al Qaeda-like operations are increasingly dependent on local “franchises,” such as in Yemen, Somalia, the Middle East, and North Africa.⁴ While potentially diminishing the scope and reach of al Qaeda’s activity, this evolution cannot be considered a strategic victory. A scattered al Qaeda network becomes more difficult to pin down. Its leadership decreases in influence but spreads in numbers. Front lines become more blurred and terrorist tactics diversify and blend. Terrorism becomes a principal tactic incorporated by states and nonstate actors within a “new” category of “hybrid” threats.⁵

On the operational and tactical side, five interconnected trends confirm an evolution of the terrorists’ strategy and modus operandi: the established connection between terrorist organizations, insurgent groups, and international organized crime; the emergence of homegrown terrorists and “lone wolves”; reliance on complex funding mechanisms; use of sophisticated propaganda; and access to advanced technologies and fascination with unconventional high-impact operations.

While not an absolute first in terrorism history, the growing nexus among terrorist organizations, insurgents, and international crime is possibly the starkest reminder that national and international actors cannot deal with terrorism in watertight compartments.⁶

Military and law enforcement operations become part of a continuum in the counterterrorism response. In some cases, terrorist and illegal activities merge to finance their organizations’ operations.⁷ Specifically, the link between terrorist entities and drug trafficking is

a well-known concern, with connections stretching from South America to West and North Africa, Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.⁸ Among others, these activities and connections give terrorists wider autonomy, making them less dependent on “external” support from sponsor nations, reducing the reach and leverage of any international response.

Besides financial support, it is the operational cooperation between these various criminal organizations that is most worrisome. Training, experience, and lessons learned are often shared between these groups to improve tactics, techniques, and materiel.⁹ This phenomenon is particularly present in so called ungoverned spaces,¹⁰ which are used by nonstate actors to establish training camps to pursue indoctrination and develop operational capacity. Ungoverned or undergoverned spaces attract criminal groups, insurgents, and terrorists alike, and states harboring such territories are either unwilling or unable to disrupt or interfere with the groups’ activities, albeit claiming sovereignty before international law. The exploitation of this “sovereignty gap” poses increasing threats to the international community due to rapidly developing communications and travel patterns, as the history of Afghanistan under Taliban rule most infamously proves.

In the last 5 years, another growing concern has been the emergence of homegrown terrorists. In the words of Lucio Caracciolo, “terrorists don’t have to come to us. They already are among us.”¹¹ Homegrown terrorists may range from lone-wolf individuals to “self-recruited, self-trained, and self-executing” groups with few or no connections to an international conspiracy, to groups living in a particular country who have trained with and maintained connections to the al Qaeda network, and finally to al Qaeda “sleepers” aiming to conduct medium- or long-term actions in a particular country.¹²

Homegrown terrorists are difficult to identify, detect, and stop. The fact that they engage in suicide attacks is a matter of greater concern to national governments.¹³ Their threat is comparatively low, but their impact on the public psyche is high.¹⁴ Through isolated, unrelated, low technology, and low-cost actions, terrorists achieve devastating societal effects well beyond their immediate victims.¹⁵ Stressed neighborhoods lose confidence in the very authorities in charge of their protection, the rhetoric becomes polarized, and escalating resentment fuels terrorist recruitment.¹⁶

In terms of finance, the growing nexus between terrorism and organized crime offers terrorist entities new and alternative financing opportunities.¹⁷ While remarkable results have been achieved in countering terrorism funding thanks to increased bilateral and multinational cooperation of law enforcement agencies and organizations,¹⁸ the suppression of funding channels traceable to terrorist groups remains particularly difficult due to their constant technical

evolution and dissemination.¹⁹ In recent years, income deriving from smuggling, money laundering, and human trafficking has grown steadily, and kidnapping of foreigners has become one of the most lucrative funding sources for international terrorists.

In parallel, to face the national and international response and maintain support and recruitment, the volume and sophistication of al Qaeda's communications have increased. There are now thousands of Web sites, in many languages, devoted to "virtual proselytism." Terrorist groups have abandoned old tape or DVD production and dissemination and turned to the use of the Internet to radicalize their followers around the globe and instruct them on the means of violence.²⁰

This extensive use of the Internet has led counterterrorism experts to consider al Qaeda and its affiliates as primary "customers" of Web forums and social media, and therefore not keen to engage in disruptive actions that could affect their own ability to reach out to members and recruits. However, as technology is evolving and becoming more available, the terrorist threat to cyber space is also increasing. In a video presented by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, al Qaeda calls for an "electronic jihad," urging "covert mujahidin" to launch cyber attacks against American critical infrastructure.²¹

The renewed interest in cyber-terrorist activities is consistent with al Qaeda's use of, and fascination with, high-impact operations. In this respect, al Qaeda's longstanding interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), specifically of a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) nature, is also well known. So far, the efforts of terrorist groups to acquire or use these weapons and materials have been sporadic and mostly unsuccessful.²² For the foreseeable future, militant jihadist groups will only be able to produce rudimentary radiological weapons (that is, "dirty bombs") that would cause great panic and disruption but only limited casualties. However, even if the use of WMDs remains confined to the high end of the threat spectrum, in the words of Harold Agnew, "If you believe that it is easy to make an improvised nuclear weapon, you are wrong. But if you believe it is impossible for a terrorist group to make an improvised nuclear bomb, you are dead."²³

With terrorism becoming increasingly globalized and hybrid, unity of effort and comprehensive approaches become the key paradigms for all counterterrorism actors. Put differently, global terrorist networks take advantage of national and international legal loopholes and operational gray areas. In a field as dynamic as counterterrorism, the lens of collective interest must replace the prism of national perspectives. Efforts should be joined in mutually reinforcing ways, beyond political entrenchments and doctrinal boundaries. In the decade-plus

that followed the 9/11 attacks, NATO proved its ability to contribute to the global fight against terror. Mindful of its assets and mandates, NATO has succeeded in identifying its added value to specific aspects of the terrorism challenge. The result has been a series of substantial counterterrorism activities whose impact, however, has been mitigated by the lack of an agreed policy defining NATO's rightful place among international counterterrorism actors.

NATO's Response

At the core of NATO's reticence in codifying its decade-long contribution to the fight against terrorism in an agreed policy lies a definition challenge. The incidence, nature, scope, and, above all, perception of the threat posed by terrorists vary enormously among countries and regions.²⁴ To provide a common definition of what constitutes a terrorist is an exercise of drafting acrobatics, impossible even for the most skilled and experienced NATO policymaker.

Yet the very nature of NATO—a political-military organization for the collective defense of its members' territories and populations from external attacks—drives its need to identify where an attack is coming from and who the enemy is. In the case of the fight against terrorism, the Alliance instinctively needs to define who and where the terrorists actually are. Terrorism, like war, is ultimately a *means* to an end, not an end per se. For many years, in the collective psyche of NATO's integrated structure, to fight against terrorism without identifying the adversary was like fighting war itself. The lack of a clear opponent denied planners and diplomats a critical element of NATO's defense paradigm. Consistent with this logic, the 1999 Strategic Concept made only indirect reference to acts of terrorism as one of many security challenges and risks together with sabotage, organized crime, and the disruption of the flow of vital resources.²⁵ On the other hand, the nature of terrorist acts has long been perceived, especially in Europe, as deriving from "internal" motives—from separatism to political extremism and anarchism.

It is therefore not surprising that, beyond its solidarity significance, at the basis of NATO's Article 5 invocation following the 9/11 attacks was the determination that the strikes were directed *from abroad*. Al Qaeda's claim of responsibility and the Taliban regime's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden to U.S. authorities provided incarnation and direction to the global terrorist threat.

This acted as a potent catalyst for NATO's contribution to the global fight against terrorism. However, NATO has preferred to avoid a potentially loaded political debate on its role in counterterrorism, opting for a more pragmatic approach. Through its operational commitments—first and foremost in Afghanistan but also in the Mediterranean Sea, in the Indian