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2006

Quiggin, T. (2006). Time for a different approach in the war on terrorism? (RSIS Commentaries, No. 082). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/92018>

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Time for a Different Approach in the War on Terrorism?

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15 August 2006

THE bombings in London of July 2005 and in Mumbai of July 2006, as well as the recent arrests of 25 individuals in the United Kingdom implicated in a plot to bomb several planes, demonstrates that the scourge of jihadist terrorism is far from being removed. Hizbollah's confrontation with Israel also serves to highlight how inconclusive and perhaps even counter productive military power alone can become when fighting terrorist tactics. Hizbollah has been able to draw a highly mechanized and sophisticated military into a conflict from which neither side can triumph. But in the logic of an asymmetric conflict between a state and a "non-state" actor such as Hizbollah, the non-state actor only has to survive in order to declare itself the winner.

The current approach to fighting terrorism had been led by a series of military and security-based approaches. The dominant approach has been the militarized strategy favoured in the "Global War on Terror," led by the Bush Administration in Washington.

Long before the attacks of 9/11, the American government had developed a policy of a militarized response to terrorism. Following the suicide bombings against American forces in Lebanon in 1982, the response in most American documents, including the National Security Decision Directive 138 (1984), was to militarize the issue. As a result, the American strategy on terrorism has been militarized for at least some 22 years now. However, even the US State Department believes the incidents of terrorism have grown more numerous. The militarized approach may produce little more than a prolonged war.

In his chapter on waging war, Sun Tzu said: "There has never been a protracted war for which a country has benefited." This ancient piece of policy-relevant wisdom remains valid today. Once a shooting war has actually started with combat operations, the result must be either a quick victory or a practical exit strategy. In contrast to this the Bush Administration and many others believe that the "Global War on Terrorism" will be a long one. The recently released American government policy document called the Quadrennial Defense Review does nothing to change this. Rather, it states that "The United States is a nation engaged in what will be a long war."

Limits to the Militarized Approach

Is it possible that now is the time for a change in the approach to fighting terrorism?

There are many other options available that may be of use. Consider first the nature of the fight against terrorism. The struggle is not so much one of simply defeating an enemy on the

battlefield, nor can progress be measured by the number of terrorists killed or captured. The fight against terrorism is very much a fight against an ideology or a set of ideas. Al Qaeda, and its inspired set of followers, poses an asymmetric and globalized threat. They do not occupy any particular ground and most of their organizing, recruiting, training and financing is carried out in a virtual manner on the Internet.

The key to defeating an asymmetric threat is not the amount of firepower that can be brought to bear on a target. The key to success against an asymmetric threat is knowledge. Understanding what drives the terrorist, learning how they get community support, tracking their recruiting methods and following their lines of communication are the keys to the successful undermining and extinction of their capabilities and their cause.

As such, the fight against terrorism cannot be won by just military force, nor can the “guards, guns and gates” approach being anything more than a defensive strategy. To win the fight against terrorism, a concerted effort must be made to confront the terrorist on their own ground and beat them at their own game.

Ironically, the recent past may hold a valuable lesson on how to carry on the fight against terrorism. The Cold War was a struggle for domination by two vastly different ideologies – one of which eventually came to dominate while the other succumbed after a long multifaceted attack.

One way of summing up the Cold War approach is captured by the acronym DIME. The letters stand for Diplomacy, Information and Intelligence, Military and Economy. As such, the fight against communism was carried out directly and indirectly using every means available to the West and its allies.

The same approach could be used now. The fight against terrorism should be an all-of-government approach across a series of like-minded states that have the common goal of stopping the spread of terrorism. The entire capabilities of the various governments must be mobilized, not just the military and intelligence services. Every part of government must consider that it has a role to play.

To use just one example, the jihadists currently dominate one of the most important “battle spaces” of the struggle. This is the Internet. Their domination is so complete that it is difficult to detect any form of counter attack. Some defensive monitoring occurs and some websites are shut down, but these are insignificant. There is no coordinated attack against the jihadists by any international alliance. If there was a coordinated multi-country approach to attacking this issue, a greater chance of degrading their capabilities would exist.

To be triumphant in the struggle against the jihadist ideology, the world will have to come up with a coordinated, full-spectrum approach that attacks jihadism on all levels. The militarized approach, adopted in the full heat of the aftermath of 9/11 may have already reached the limits of its usefulness.

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