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Combating Terrorism: Major Shift in US Approach?

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

To counter the current and emerging Al Qaeda-IS hybrid threat, the US seeks to build a global ecosystem resistant to the pernicious ideology of terrorist groups. For lasting impact, the US and its allies need to address both the ideality and reality of global conflict.

Commentary

THE WHITE House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism on 18-19 February 2015 is a turning point in the US fight against terrorism. Since 9/11, the dominant US-led Western approach to fight the Al Qaeda-led global movement has been lethal and kinetic. While the US Department of Defence and CIA will continue to spearhead the operational counter terrorism strategy of capturing and killing terrorists and disrupting their operations, the departments of state and justice will build governmental and civil society capacities to strengthen community resilience.

The current and emerging challenge of community radicalisation was characterised at the summit as both a national security challenge and a societal issue. Considering the severity and magnitude of the threat, governments recognise they alone cannot fight and win. To develop domestic solutions to global problems, the summit identified the frontline role of civil society partnership with government and industry. With the expansion of the threat, especially with the terrorists and their supporters harnessing technology, the US co-opted technology firms and coupled them with community organisations. With the participation of multiple actors, state and societal response to the current and emerging threat will be complex but necessary.

The context

With the meteoric rise of IS, an Al Qaeda mutant, the nature of the global threat changed. The Al Qaeda-centric threat is eclipsed by an Al Qaeda-IS hybrid global threat. With IS' mastery of social media, the threat has shifted to IS-inspired and -instigated attacks worldwide. In the backdrop of IS exploitation of social media, the role of community leaders especially faith leaders was considered paramount to influence and shape the community.

Emphasising upstream intervention, the summit delineated the role of family, friends and community to identify early indicators of radicalisation. Considering the inherent community mistrust of government in some countries, the summit urged the participation of civil society with private sector funding to formulate and lead initiatives in countering violent extremism.

CVE as key US strategy

Originally conceived to mobilise US government and their partners, the summit developed an international character with the spike in recent home-grown attacks worldwide. In addition to US delegates from government, business, civil society, and education sector, the summit enlisted the participation of delegations from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the West. They included government ministers, chiefs of security and intelligence services, business leaders, CEOs of technology companies, and heads of think tanks and research organisations.

The ministerial meeting at the US State Department included ministers from more than 60 countries as well as high-level representatives from the United Nations, the European Union and the League of Arab States, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). With the unprecedented commitment of the US government at the highest level and allocation of resources to support counter- and radicalisation programmes worldwide, future US strategy will be both threat- and population-centric.

With the threat landscape shifting to the community, the US seeks to build capabilities within civil society with expertise and resources from the private sector. To engage vulnerable segments of society to radicalisation, the diverse range of stakeholders include technology companies from Google to Facebook, educators and faith-leaders. The belated response by the US to CVE earned criticism. Nonetheless, compared to government efforts, community initiatives will endure and last.

Crafting a response

In parallel with the government response to counter the threat, a societal response is essential to prevent community radicalisation. Most countries have visions but in reality only a few countries practise upstream community engagement and downstream terrorist rehabilitation. Often the existing programmes are too small and ad hoc to make an enduring impact. The strategy should be to build robust and structured programmes to fight the extant and emerging threat.

To inoculate vulnerable segments of communities, it is vital to launch initiatives to raise public awareness, heighten interest, enlist community participation, and build greater understanding between diverse communities. Similarly, government should partner with community organisations, religious institutions, academia and industry to counter extremist and terrorist ideologies both in the physical and cyber space. Community participation is paramount to disrupt radicalisation, transformation of self-radicalised extremists into operational terrorists, and recruitment of foreign fighters.

To manage the most pernicious foreign fighter threat, governments will need to share intelligence across borders and between federal, state and local agencies. While a robust criminal-justice and prisons framework is a must, based on the threat posed by individual returnees, national security agencies should be empowered to determine on a case- by-case basis if they should be detained, charged and prosecuted or rehabilitated and reintegrated. Even if successfully tried and sentenced, considering that he or she will be released sooner or later, rehabilitation should be made mandatory not voluntary.

The road ahead

The White House Summit demonstrated the US commitment to both address the looming terrorist threat as well as reflect on US failures. The summit is a significant milestone and a turning point in America's counter-terrorism fight which had relied predominantly on hard power. Nonetheless, both soft and hard approaches and their integration is pivotal for mitigating the threat. With recent intelligence of a fledgling IS external wing, the world must prepare for both IS-inspired homegrown attacks and also IS-directed attacks like those of 9/11.

The US is launching a global CVE initiative 14 years after 9/11. Had the US understood and adopted a CVE strategy in parallel with Bush's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) immediately after 9/11, the global threat may not have reached the current level. By developing a rehabilitation programme in Guantanamo Bay, the rate of recidivism of the Gitmo detainees would have been low. Nonetheless,

with the US coming on board, CVE will be integrated into the national counter terrorism agendas of most governments in the coming years.

On the margins of the forthcoming UN General Assembly in September 2015, President Obama will host a leader-level summit to share a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder action agenda against violent extremism and to chart a path for progress. But will governments in the Muslim World embrace CVE? By identifying and engaging appropriate partners, the US can overcome the scepticism inherent in government-led CVE initiatives.

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