



NEWPORT PAPERS

A Series of Point Papers
from the Naval War College and the
Navy Warfare Development Command
For Senior Leadership
In Response to Critical Issues

Strategy / CONOPS / Doctrine / Decision

United States Naval War College
Navy Warfare Development Command
Newport, Rhode Island

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Newport Paper: 02

U.S. WAR OBJECTIVES

Purpose: To examine potential U.S. objectives for the terror war.

Background: A clear understanding of political objectives is a precondition for the development of sound strategy. In his speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush outlined U.S. objectives for the war on terrorism. He declared that the United States seeks the “destruction and defeat of the global terror network” known as Al Qaeda. He also declared that “any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” As he announced, “Our war...will not end until every group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.”

It is useful to divide our goals for the war on terrorism into one primary and several secondary objectives. The primary objective is our central and most important objective; it will determine success or failure. Secondary objectives contribute to achieving our primary objective.

Discussion:

Potential Primary Objectives

One can conceive of a number of potential primary objectives, including: (1) preventing further terrorist attacks on the United States, (2) disrupting or eliminating the Al Qaeda terror network, (3) defeating every terrorist group with global reach, or (4) terminating state support for terrorist groups with global reach.

(1) Prevent further terrorist attacks on the United States. Protecting the United States against foreign attack is a basic constitutional responsibility of the federal government. The U.S. Government must prevent further terrorist attacks against the United States. This includes defending the U. S. homeland and protecting U.S. interests and forces abroad.

(2) Disrupt or eliminate the Al Qaeda terror network. Al Qaeda is believed to be responsible for the September 11 attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It is the largest, most sophisticated, and best funded terror network in the world. Destroying Al Qaeda will reduce the threat to the United States, its friends and allies, and provide a tangible demonstration of the U.S. commitment to eliminating international terrorism. However, doing so will not, in and of itself, bring an end to international terrorism.

(3) Defeat terrorist groups with global reach. The elimination of Al Qaeda is a first step toward the elimination of terrorist groups with international reach; it is not, clearly, the final step. Policymakers must determine, however, how many terrorist groups they want to engage simultaneously and whether we must necessarily take on any and all terrorist groups with either demonstrated or latent/potential global reach.

(4) Terminate state support for terrorist groups with global reach. International terrorist organizations exist, in part, because they enjoy the support—either active or passive—of states. If the United States is to eliminate terrorist organizations of global reach, then it must bring about an end to state support for transnational terrorism.

?? In practice, only a handful of states currently sponsor or shelter terrorists. If the United States eliminates the Al Qaeda network and overthrows the Taliban regime that supports it, then other states may withdraw their support for terrorist organizations. Other states may need to be coerced or overthrown.

?? Other states passively sponsor terrorism by turning a blind eye to the activities of terrorist organizations on their soil. These states fear the domestic backlash of a hard-line approach to terrorist organizations. Convincing them to change their behavior may prove difficult.

Potential Secondary Objectives

If one of the four potential primary objectives becomes *the* primary objective, then the others become important secondary objectives. Additional secondary objectives could include the following:

(1) Capture or eliminate Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden is the spiritual and organizational leader of Al Qaeda. He is also responsible for much of the organization's fundraising. His capture or elimination can be expected to reduce Al Qaeda's effectiveness, either temporarily or permanently. However, putting him on trial would grant him and his organization undue legitimacy. It would give him a prominent venue from which he could spread his ideology. And it might lead to additional terrorist acts as part of an effort to free him. On the other hand, killing bin Laden could turn him into a martyr and inspire additional acts of terrorism.

(2) Capture or eliminate the senior leadership of Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda is not a one-man organization. Rather, it relies upon sophisticated fund-raising, planning, intelligence, and operations networks. These networks allow Al Qaeda to have a global reach. Eliminating Al Qaeda requires that the United States not only capture or eliminate Osama bin Laden, but his senior lieutenants as well.

(3) Eliminate or disrupt funding for Al Qaeda. One distinguishing characteristic of Al Qaeda is its access to substantial financial resources. This funding, from a diverse array of business interests, investments, and donors, enables Al Qaeda to operate across the

globe. Eliminating Al Qaeda requires that the United States eliminate or disrupt its funding.

?? It is desirable to choke off funding for Al Qaeda. However, given the many sources of funds that the organization enjoys, such an objective may be impossible to achieve. Nonetheless, degrading those resources will reduce the range of operations that it can undertake.

(4) Overthrow the Taliban regime. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda enjoy a symbiotic relationship: the Taliban shelter Al Qaeda, while Osama bin Laden supports the Taliban. Elimination of the Taliban may be necessary to root out the Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. In addition, the fall of the Taliban would provide a concrete demonstration of the price to be paid by regimes that sponsor terrorism.

?? The Taliban have limited legitimacy within Afghanistan and even less legitimacy outside the country. It is a brutal and repressive regime that has done little to help the Afghani people. Only three states recognize the regime, and only one—Pakistan—maintains diplomatic relations. Few will mourn the Taliban's demise.

?? The United States should, however, anticipate the negative consequences of overthrowing the Taliban. For example, neighboring countries may experience increased refugee flows. Moreover, if the United States played a prominent role in the overthrow of the Taliban, then other regimes, perhaps even potential coalition partners, will likely denounce U.S. actions and could distance themselves from the United States and its long-term goal of eliminating global terrorism.

(5) Enhance regional order and stability. Terrorists and their supporters exploit and exacerbate domestic and regional instability. A sustainable victory in the terror war may well entail not only defeating terrorists and their supporters but also tackling the underlying conditions that allow our enemies to thrive.

?? Adverse social, economic, and political conditions give rise to the discontent that extremists manipulate and exploit. Those conditions include relative deprivation, communal frustration, moribund economies, lack of opportunity, unemployment, corruption, despotism, oppression, and the failure of political authorities to reconcile modernity and tradition.

?? A long-term commitment to enhancing regional order and stability via an array of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including humanitarian assistance and nation-building, may be required to consolidate victory in the terror war.

Recommendations/Actions: Policy makers must clearly identify primary and secondary war objectives.