Reducing the Risk

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T HE EFFECTIVE USE OF RHETORIC in communicating public policy cannot be overstated. In democratic governments, elected officials must be able to accurately and (equally as important) concisely convey their actions in a way that explains both the problem and solution. Since the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, the Department's mission has sometimes been difficult to understand. What the government is doing to protect its citizen from terrorism and how the government is doing it, is something few people can articulate. Not until recently has the administration found the proper rhetorical tools that explain both the challenges the nation faces with respect to terrorism and how the government is addressing those challenges. As will be shown below, the concept of "reducing the risk" more than any other aspect of homeland security policy will be critical in guiding the actions of policy makers for years to come.

The Importance of Rhetoric

When the nation is threatened by an idealogical opposition, it is often rhetorical arguments that galvanize the public in support of a common goal.

In February of 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected Provisional President of the Confederate States of America. On April 12th of the same year, Fort Sumter was attacked and destroyed by Confederate Forces—thus beginning the Civil War. To prepare the nation for war, President Lincoln called a special session of Congress on July 4, 1861. In his statement to the Senate and House of Representatives, he asked the Congress to legitimize his recent callup of troops, his blockade of the ports of secessionist states, and his suspension of the writ of *habeus corpus*. His justification for becoming the most centralized president in history was the President's constitutional duty to "preserve the union." This rhetorical statement was direct and to the point. It described the struggle against secession in a way the American people, the Congress, and the Federal Courts could easily understand and support.

The Cold War represented a similar idealogical challenge. George Keenan's 1947 paper, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," gave a very detailed analysis of the factors influencing Russian, Communist, and Soviet thinking of the time. However, the message most people took away from his now famous paper was the following sentence:

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> In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.[1]

Much to the author's surprise, this concept of "containment" became the foundation of diplomatic, economic, and military policy toward communist countries for the next forty years.[2]

Why did this happen? Why was this one sentence interpreted so broadly? The answer is quite simple: It was excellent rhetoric. Much like Lincoln's mission to "preserve the union," Keenan's concept of containment was direct and to the point. With that one word, policy makers could explain both the problem, in this case Russian expansive tendencies, and the solution: containment. This rhetoric provided a simple framework to counter communism, an ideology that was difficult for most people to understand. For forty years, government actions were measured by their success in containing the communist threat.

The modern idealogical challenge to the United States (and the rest of the Western World) is that of radical Islam. How do we counter this ideologically driven opponent with no well defined geographical base or known constituency?

At a recent Congressional hearing, Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff was asked to summarize his strategy for dealing with terrorists. He answered, "In a nutshell it's: reduce risk...And we do it by looking at all the elements in the chain of risk."[3] This clear and concise statement provided (for the first time) a framework for the Department of Homeland Security's enduring mission. The simple statement, *reducing the risk*, describes both the problem, we are at risk, and the solution, we must work to reduce this risk. This concept of *reducing the risk*, more than any other aspect of homeland security policy has been most successful in communicating the challenges we face and will continue to be the most critical aspect of homeland security policy.

The Formalism of Risk

While the rhetorical statement, reducing the risk, may be simple, the definition of risk (at first glance) may appear difficult. The formulation of risk is not new or rare in either the private or public sectors. Engineers, economists, political analysis, and public health professionals all employ some method of risk analysis in their decision making processes. Academics have made an industry out of quantifying risk and adding contributing factors to risk equations.

Fortunately, although every field's understanding of risk may be slightly different, the meaning of risk vis-à-vis homeland security can be described by three fundamental factors: threat, vulnerability, and consequence. What is more, risk is the product of

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[1] George F. Keenan (published under the name "X"), *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

[2] George F. Keenan, "CONTAINMENT: 40 Years Later : Containment Then and Now," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1987.

[3] Full Committee Hearing, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives. (Wednesday, September 5, 2007).

these terms not the sum. If any one of them is zero then the risk is zero.[4] Likewise, if any of the terms is much greater than the others, it can drive the risk higher even when the other terms may be small.

Taken together, these three factors describe – either qualitatively or quantitatively when possible – our nation's risk to terrorism. In the following sections, each of these terms is discussed in relation to their influence on terrorism risk assessment.

Threat

In the post-9/11 world, it is common to hear talk regarding the "probability" of terrorism. Probability, however, is best suited for naturally occurring phenomena such as lightning strikes, hurricanes, and rain. The more relevant term for homeland security purposes is the *threat* of terrorism, where threat is a combination of intent and capability.

The role intent plays in threat assessment can be illustrated by a comparison of two homes. On the one hand, there is my mother's home in a small town in western Pennsylvania. Although al-Qa'ida may be capable of blowing up her home, they have (as far as I know) no intent to do so. On the other hand, there is my apartment in Washington D.C., conveniently located between the U.S. Capitol Building and the White House. While I doubt Usama Bin Laden has my name on his list of targets, my apartment's proximity to other targets increases the risk to my home. Terrorist *capability* is the same in both cases, but terrorist *intent* to cause destruction is understandably higher in Washington D.C. than it is in a small town in western Pennsylvania.

Capability can be explained in a similar manner. The threat of an improvised explosive device (IED) such as those used in Iraq or Afghanistan is obviously higher than that of a improvised nuclear device. Although al-Qa'ida has stated their *intent* to acquire and use nuclear devices, they are simple not as capable of acquiring INDs as they are in acquiring IEDs. This makes the threat of nuclear terrorism low as compared to the threat of terrorism by conventional explosives. Does this mean the *risk* of nuclear terrorism is low? Certainly not—keep reading.

Vulnerability

When most people think of vulnerabilities, they think of the impact a terrorist strike would have on components of our critical infrastructure or key resources. Vulnerability of targets depends on such factors as target hardness, single-point failures, as wells as redundancy and reconstitution capability. A target's hardness refers to the ease or difficulty with which a terrorist attack could be effectively accomplished. A critical facility with a firm structure and guards at the entrance is harder to attack than one with multiple points of access and no guards at the door.

Some systems are vulnerable due to single-point failures. Our nation's aging electrical grid is a prime example. In August of 2003, the shutdown of one power plant

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[4]Henry Kissinger used a similar formalism in his early work on nuclear deterrence. (Henry Kissinger, *The Necessity For Choice*, p. 12, 1961.)

in Northern Ohio caused an electrical blackout throughout much of the American Northeast. Single-point failures are also common in transit systems and production capability. It is the wide spread nature of this problem that makes it such a great vulnerability. One mitigation to single-point failures is built in redundancy and our ability to reconstitute a capability if it were lost. Alternatively, the absence of redundancy and reconstitution capability is a further vulnerability.

Consequence

Consequence is the one risk factor that most people can agree on how to quantify. A successful terrorist attack would result in the loss of life and/or property—both things that are relatively easy to correlate with geographical regions. This allows us to compare the consequence from different types of terrorist attacks and the consequence of similar attacks at different locations. A powerful car bomb, for example, would have different levels of consequence in a small town in western Pennsylvania than the same size bomb would have in New York City. Although the destructive force of the bomb may be similar, a successful attack New York City – with the highest population density in the country and the nation's third largest economy – would have much higher consequence.

Quantifying consequence in this way also allows us to rank the risk of various forms of attack. Weapons that claim many lives and destroy a lot of property naturally have greater consequence. This is what drives the risk of nuclear terrorism. As we saw above, the threat of nuclear terrorism may be low, but the consequence of the successful detonation of nuclear device in an urban area would be catastrophic, resulting in thousands of fatalities and tens of billions of dollars in damage. This level of catastrophic consequence is what makes the *risk* of nuclear terrorism high, even though the threat may be low.

It is also important to note that consequence is the summation (not the product) of loss of life and property. It is possible to imagine a terrorist attack that claims only life and leaves infrastructure intact – such as the Sarin gas attacks in Tokyo's subway in 1995 – or an attack that claims no lives but has dire economic consequences – such as the detonation of a dirty bomb – by disrupting service or denying access to critical infrastructure.

Utilizing Rhetoric

With the above formalism, we have answered the question of how to confront the idealogical threat of terrorism: by reducing the risk. The next logical question we must ask is, How do we measure success? Surely, no one believes that the risk of terrorism can ever be reduced to zero. Even the current administration feels we will never reach a terrorism care-free environment. The National Strategy for Homeland Security states:

> Recognizing that the future is uncertain and that we cannot envision or prepare for every potential threat, we must understand and accept a certain

level of risk as a permanent condition.[5]

If we must accept a "certain level of risk as a permanent condition," how can we tell if reducing the risk is an effective strategy? Will we know when we've reduced risk to the proper level?

In a recent paper, Philip Gordon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, described what is and is not required to win the War on Terror. He states, that rather than concentrating on every possible threat, the government should concentrate on reducing the risk of terrorism. He even suggests the acceptable level of risk that policy makers should strive to attain:

> [Winning the War on Terror] will mean not the complete elimination of any possible terrorist threat. . . but rather the reduction of the risk of terrorism to such a level that it does not significantly affect average citizens' daily lives, preoccupy their thoughts, or provoke overreaction. At that point, even the terrorists will realize their violence is futile.[6]

According to Gordon, success is attained when the risk of terrorism has been reduced to such a level that it does not, "significantly affect average citizens' daily lives, preoccupy their thoughts, or provoke overreaction." If lack of overreaction is an indicator, we must be having some success at reducing the risk. After all, we haven't had a run on duct tape since 2003!

Although the rhetoric of *reducing the risk* has only recently made its appearance, the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to accomplish this goal have been ongoing for the past six years. What the makes the rhetoric so important is the ability it gives policy makers to answer the question, Are we safer today than we were six years ago? The answer is a resounding yes. Over the past six years, the government has limited terrorist's capability to harm us, thereby reducing the threat. They have worked to reduce our vulnerability by hardening targets and increasing resiliency of our critical infrastructure. They have worked to mitigate consequence by acquiring medical countermeasures against biological, chemical, and radiological agents of terrorism.

All of these successes have been achieved through the government's operations to deter, detect, and disrupt terrorist activity along with implementing procedures for response and recovery from successful terrorist attacks. Of course, people have made an industry of adding terms to this methodology, but all of these tactics play their role in reducing one or multiple factors in the risk equation.

The risk of terrorism will occupy the minds of our leaders for long into the foreseeable future. Homeland Security's enduring mission of reducing the risk should guide policy makers in every aspect of their decisions to confront this challenge. The same concept should be used to measure success of government actions and policy implementation. Just as the Keenan's philosophy of containment galvanized the Western World throughout the Cold War, the concept of "reducing the risk" will help Americans understand both the challenge and the solution for as long as terrorism dominates the political landscape.

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[5]Homeland Security Council, *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, p. 25 (October 2007).

[6]Philip H. Gordon, "Can the War on Terror Be Won?" *Foreign Affairs*, **86** (6), p. 54, November/December 2007.