HOT TOPICS

The Threat of MANPADS to Commercial Aviation

For many years, aviation experts have worried about the possibility that terrorists may attack a domestic airliner with shoulder-fired missiles, also known as man-portable air defense systems, or MANPADS. Such concerns about possible attacks in the United States were heightened after the terrorist attacks of September 11th and an unsuccessful attack by terrorists using MANPADS against an Israeli airliner at an airport in Kenya in November 2002. This paper addresses the question of whether the U.S. government should develop and deploy countermeasure systems to protect commercial aircraft from such missile attacks and, if so, what types of systems merit consideration.

Given the significant uncertainties in the cost of countermeasures and their effectiveness in reducing our overall vulnerability to catastrophic airline damage, the paper argues for postponing a decision about installing such systems until they can be developed and shown to be more compatible in a commercial environment. It also argues for a concurrent effort to better understand damage mechanisms and the likelihood of catastrophic damage to airliners from such weapons. Finally, beyond technical countermeasures, attention should focus on a broader set of initiatives aimed at striking and capturing terrorists abroad, impeding their acquisition of missiles, preventing them and their weapons from entering the United States, and, if they do so, keeping them out of areas adjacent to airports.

READ MORE: Airliner Anti-missile Systems Too Expensive and Unreliable

Attacking Terrorism at Its Roots: The Value of Strategic Influence Policy

In conducting the war on terrorism effectively, the United States must go beyond arresting or killing existing terrorists—it must dissuade terrorists from attacking the United States, divert youths from joining terrorist groups, and persuade the leaders of states and nongovernmental institutions to withhold support for terrorists. One approach the U.S. government might use to do this is strategic influence policy—the use of public diplomacy and other information campaigns to promote national security. This report addresses the role of strategic influence—its potential uses and limitations—in achieving these objectives.

Based on a review of the cognitive and social psychology literatures, the study finds that strategic influence operations could contribute to the success of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. However, an analysis of three past U.S. influence operations tempts this optimism, concluding that influence campaigns are highly sensitive to operational environments and that campaigns that do not take these sensitivities into account not only fail but are counterproductive. In further examining the potential outcome of such campaigns in three Muslim communities, the research finds that policymakers could use influence policies to strengthen divergences in interests between al Qaeda and its affiliates, as well as among the terrorists, radical institutions, and wider sympathetic communities. Recommended guidelines for developing effective campaigns include matching operational objectives, message, and delivery to audience, incorporating feedback mechanisms into the campaign, and setting realistic expectations.

READ MORE: Dissuading Terror: Strategic Influence and the Struggle Against Terrorism

Defending America Against Suicide Terrorism

As we are seeing in Iraq, suicide bombings have become an increasingly popular tool for terrorists. In fact, since 1982 more than 350 suicide attacks have occurred in 23 countries, including Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Turkey, Italy, Indonesia, Pakistan, Colombia, Argentina, Kenya, Tanzania, Croatia, Morocco, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq. And according to The RAND Chronology of International Terrorism, two-thirds of the suicide bombings recorded since 1968 have occurred in the past three years alone.

As the September 11th attacks made clear, the United States is not immune to such suicide attacks. How can the United States prepare for potential future attacks? This report describes the logic behind suicide terrorism, how other countries that have had sustained, intense, and numerous suicide attacks have dealt with it, and the lessons they learned in the process. These lessons offer a strong foundation on which American law enforcement can build.

Some of the lessons that emerge are to educate the public and to alert officers to the unreliability of profiling while providing other ways to identify suicide bombers. Officers must also have appropriate policies and procedures in place for reacting to a potential or actual bombing. For example, they must ensure that victims receive immediate medical attention, but they must also ensure that responders are safe from secondary attacks. Finally, the most effective way to counter suicide terrorism is not to rely on specialized units but to instill a counter-suicide mindset in every cop on the street.

READ MORE: Preparing for Suicide Terrorism: A Primer for American Law Enforcement Agencies and Officers

FORTHCOMING REPORT

The ability of terrorist groups to learn—adapt new weapons, improve their skills, and collect intelligence—is key to the threat they pose to the United States. Two forthcoming reports examine how terrorist organizations learn and the implications of their learning activities for efforts to combat terrorism.

For over 30 years, RAND has been a world leader in terrorism research and analysis. To view RAND’s terrorism and homeland security research, go to http://www.rand.org/research_areas/terrorism/.

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