The RAND Frederick S. Pardee Center
for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition

International Programs at RAND

THE ARTS
CHILD POLICY
CIVIL JUSTICE
EDUCATION
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBSTANCE ABUSE
TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

This PDF document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Jump down to document

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

Browse Books & Publications

Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore the RAND Pardee Center for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition

View document details

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND PDFs to a non-RAND Web site is prohibited. RAND PDFs are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see RAND Permissions.

This product is part of the RAND Corporation documented briefing series. RAND documented briefings are based on research briefed to a client, sponsor, or targeted audience and provide additional information on a specific topic. Although documented briefings have been peer reviewed, they are not expected to be comprehensive and may present preliminary findings.

DOCUMENTED
BRIEFING

Comparing Alternative U.S. Counterterrorism Strategies

Can Assumption-Based Planning Help Elevate the Debate?

Robert J. Lempert, Horacio R. Trujillo, David Aaron,
James A. Dewar, Sandra H. Berry, Steven W. Popper

The RAND Frederick S. Pardee Center
for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition

International Programs at RAND

The report results from the continuing program of RAND-initiated independent research. Support for such research is provided, in part, by donors and by the independent research and development provisions of RAND's contracts for the operation of its U.S. Department of Defense federally funded research and development centers.

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

RAND® is a registered trademark.

© Copyright 2008 RAND Corporation

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from RAND.

Published 2008 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
RAND URL: http://www.rand.org
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: order@rand.org

Summary

At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States faces numerous, significant, long-term, and novel challenges, not the least of which is countering the threat from today's virulent new strain of terrorism. Frequently, both expert decisionmakers and lay citizens have trouble assessing alternative strategies to address such issues because of the emotions they engender and of the deep uncertainty involved. For instance, is the struggle against terrorism more similar to a war or to a police action? Are recalcitrant allies a distraction or a valuable sounding board encouraging the United States to modify faulty plans? Is restraint a dangerous weakness or a vital strength? There seems to be insufficient evidence to end the debate on such questions any time soon.

RAND has a long history of developing and employing methods for addressing such questions and distilling complex policy problems into their essential trade-offs. One such approach, assumption-based planning (ABP), focuses on identifying and addressing the key assumptions and thus the key vulnerabilities underlying an organization's plans. ABP not only offers a qualitative approach widely useful in its own right but has also provided the foundation for a family of new quantitative methods that aim to improve strategic decisionmaking under the conditions of deep uncertainty that characterize the terrorism threat.

In the hands of RAND analysts, ABP has often proved useful in helping clients evaluate and improve their organization's plan. But groups whose members hold conflicting views have not previously used ABP to compare alternative plans. The question thus arises: Can ABP help contentious groups more systematically debate alternative U.S. counterterrorism strategies?

To help address this question, we conducted two sets of workshops using ABP. The first set engaged academic and policymaking experts, testing whether ABP could usefully compare the strengths and weaknesses of alternative strategies and how ABP would perform in a contentious group setting. The second set repeated the experiment with a lay audience that the RAND team assembled in collaboration with the League of Women Voters (the League). The lay workshop employed survey research techniques with the participants to attempt to measure ABP's effect on their debate.

The workshops examined three alternative approaches to counterterrorism: the current U.S. national strategy for combating terrorism, an enhanced law-enforcement and intelligence strategy focusing on terrorism as a criminal activity, and a disengagement and deterrence strategy that focuses on U.S. political withdrawal from Islamic regions of the world and the threat of massive retaliation against any future terrorist attacks. These strategies were chosen to represent a diverse set of responses to the strategic problem that the new terrorism poses and to map well onto a range of different voices in the U.S. political debate.

Applying ABP in the workshops suggested some interesting similarities and differences among the key assumptions underlying the three strategies. For instance, the three make very different assumptions about the nature of the terrorist threat, the availability of U.S. resources, and the extent to which the United States can rely on the cooperation of other nations (see Table S.1).

The workshops also suggest that the strategies share some common assumptions. For instance, both the current U.S. and the law-enforcement strategies assume that a broad consensus among the world's peoples will find terrorism an unacceptable means to pursue any ends. Both these strategies assume that human societies can be improved and that the United States can play a key role in helping other people improve their societies.

Overall, the workshops suggest that all three plans have potentially significant, vulnerable assumptions and that none is robust against failure and surprise.

The workshops also demonstrate that ABP can prove a useful tool for facilitating discussions among experts and lay participants. In particular, we gave written surveys to all participants before and after the lay workshop to measure how they responded to the experience and how it affected their views. While few participants reported any significant change in the strategy they most favored, we found that the workshop helped them dispassionately debate an emotional and complex topic and to deepen their understanding of the strengths and the weaknesses of alternative approaches.

Table S.1
Assumptions Under Three Strategies

Area of Assumption	Current U.S. Plan	Enhanced Law Enforcement	Disengagement
Threat	Global terrorist organizations are a critical threat to the U.S. way of life. These organizations garner only narrow support in the Islamic world. They rely on key leaders and resources in a few states.	Terrorism is one threat among many. Terrorists will not gain strength from perceptions of U.S. weakness.	Global terrorist organizations represent a dangerous insurrection opposed to U.S. policy; will respond to changed U.S. policies, not exploit perceived weakness, and be deterred by violence; and are broadly supported in the Islamic world and centered in Islamic lands.
World conditions	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable.	Broad consensus will find terrorism unacceptable. International institutions can be effective.	Costs of changing current policies are low if the United States were to greatly reduce its involvement in the Middle East.
Response of other actors	Others will cooperate with the United States even when they disagree. Democracy reduces the threat. Other governments can contain local threats.	Cooperation can be earned. Other governments can contain local threats.	Other nations and groups respond only to immutable interests; values do not matter.
U.S. capabilities	The U.S. military can rise to any challenge. The United States has few resource constraints. U.S. action can change the behavior of other countries. The U.S. public demands that the government spare no expense to keep it safe.	Law enforcement and intelligence can be effective. U.S. action can change other countries. The U.S. public values civil liberties and will support a nonmilitary response.	The U.S. military can deter and punish. The U.S. public will tolerate reduced Middle East presences and unrestrained violence. U.S. security institutions are not well suited for current threats.

This briefing summarizes the ABP approach, describes each set of workshops and their results, and suggests how future workshops might be improved. While this document focuses on identifying and comparing the key assumptions underlying alternative strategies, it also suggests how ABP and related methods might be used to develop more robust plans than those considered here.

Overall, the workshops suggest that ABP contributes a potentially useful framework for improving public debates about a response to terrorism and for helping the United States address the many significant, long-term, and novel challenges it faces at the dawn of this new century.