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A Strategic Planning Approach

Defining Alternative Counterterrorism Strategies as an Illustration

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The Need for Strategic Planning

While the U.S. government has historically undertaken strategic reviews and produced numerous strategy documents, these have provided only very general directions for U.S. policymakers. They do not represent what might be called strategic planning: the definition of a strategy in which the means are prioritized to achieve an operationally defined strategic goal.

Many would argue that the setting of priorities is impossible given the complexity of the world. Priorities can also limit the flexibility government departments claim they need to be able to carry out their missions. There is also widespread appreciation of the difficulty of setting priorities within the decentralized U.S. policymaking process. Others, however, do see a need for setting priorities. One reason would be to increase the effectiveness of one’s policies in achieving strategic goals. Priorities would also make it possible to allocate limited government resources and provide a compelling foundation for seeking public and congressional support for particular programs. Better efficiencies in government activities could also be achieved by establishing priorities, and priorities could help achieve coherence in the government’s overall activities and operations.

The purpose of this study is to define an approach to strategic planning for consideration by the U.S. government and to illustrate its application using the example of the critical national security topic of counterterrorism. To do this, we drew on more than twenty RAND research reports and on numerous RAND experts. It is important to note that this exercise is intended to be purely illustrative: We are not advocating any specific roadmap, operational plan, or bureaucratic solution to the counterterrorism challenges discussed here.

An Approach to Strategic Planning

Our strategic planning approach has four steps as shown in Figure S.1. The approach aims to systematically define alternative strategies and to suggest how one might go about choosing one of the strategies, i.e., the considerations that could lead to the adoption of one strategy rather than another.
Illustrating the Approach: Alternative Counterterrorism Strategies

In our illustrative case, counterterrorism, we defined the strategic goal (Step 1) as:

**Prevent attacks by al Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadist groups from occurring within the United States that are psychologically significant (i.e., attacks involving tens of casualties or smaller frequent attacks).**

We next defined the full range of available means, or policy tools, making them as specific and distinct as possible (Step 2). We then asked RAND experts for their views on which of the “means” should be given priority and why. These views tended to diverge based on the experts’ assessments of the primary requirement for al Qaeda to be able successfully to attack the U.S. homeland.

Based on these varying assessments, we defined three alternative counterterrorism strategy approaches, and then selected the means to carry them out, differentiating those that were “core” priority means and those that could be added, depending on how one views their potential effectiveness in achieving the strategic goal (Step 3). The strategies are summarized in Table S.2.

The final step in our approach to strategic planning is to set the stage for policymakers to choose among the alternative strategy approaches. For counterterrorism, we outlined a number of considerations that could be used to guide this choice. One is whether one of the assessments of what al Qaeda needs to carry out psychologically significant attacks in the United States is correct in its identification of the primary requirement, and if so, the choice of that strategy approach would follow. Another consideration is how well the strategy approaches measure up to what we know about al Qaeda’s history of operations and what has worked or not worked in terms of U.S. actions. Yet another consideration is whether al Qaeda currently has, or in the near future will have, the capabilities that match the primary requirement identified in each
A final consideration is how well the United States could be expected to implement the strategy approach.

If a strategy approach is chosen, then steps would be needed to implement the strategy, including decisions about exactly what the prioritized means will comprise, what programs will be employed, what funds will be allocated, and how the counterterrorism strategy will be integrated with other U.S. national security policies.

### Implementing the Strategic Planning Approach Within the U.S. Government

How might our strategic planning approach be implemented within the U.S. government national security policymaking process? In real-world policymaking, the intellectual steps in our strategic planning approach would need to be undertaken in a very different environment from that at RAND: one where officials from many departments and agencies bring expertise as well as strong bureaucratic interests, where decisionmaking responsibility is highly decentralized, and where resistance exists not only to making choices but also to making changes in existing policies.

Implementing our strategic planning approach inside the U.S. government will, therefore, require a top-down decisionmaking process, orchestrated by the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, on behalf of the President, and with the personal engagement of the department secretaries and agency heads. The choice of a strategy would be informed by a background paper that would flesh out each of the steps in our strategic planning approach for the chosen national security topic. The key step is defining the alternative strategies. These need to be analytically derived, based on assessments of the factors that might threaten achievement of the strategic goal. The strategies should not be bureaucratically driven and they should not, as is often the case in the government, represent a single bureaucratic-consensus option and a number of “straw man” alternatives.

### Table S.1 Components of Counterterrorism Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Strategy 1</th>
<th>Strategy 2</th>
<th>Strategy 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of what al Qaeda needs to be able to inflict psychologically significant attacks in the United States</td>
<td>Maintain active network of individuals and groups with access to resources and communications</td>
<td>Secure territory and establish a base to plan, train, and acquire resources</td>
<td>Motivate leaders and recruits to undertake violent attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall strategy approach</td>
<td>Disrupt violent jihadist groups’ activities through counterterrorism operations</td>
<td>Deny jihadist groups safe havens and resources</td>
<td>Reduce influence of purveyors of jihadist ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core priority means</td>
<td>Assist friendly governments in their ability to operate on their own against violent jihadist groups</td>
<td>Assist states in extending governance, infrastructure, and security throughout their territories</td>
<td>Exploit weakened theological justification for violence; disrupt and capture motivational leaders; encourage defections from jihadist groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other possible priority means</td>
<td>Provide U.S. operational assistance; capture or kill highly skilled operational leaders</td>
<td>Seek to deny money, recruits, and conventional weapons to jihadist groups in countries with ungoverned territories</td>
<td>Break up cooperation between al Qaeda and local jihadist groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the end, even if a single strategy with prioritized means is not chosen, going through the steps in our strategic planning approach has advantages. It can help clarify what one aims to achieve for the specific national security policy topic, uncover underlying assumptions, and illuminate the critical and contentious issues. Most importantly, it would mean a decision to pursue all means without any prioritization was undertaken not by default but, rather, consciously, because it was identified as being the best available course of action.