The US National Counter-Terrorism Strategy: The Evolution and Current Situation

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The 9/11 terrorist attacks, as significant events which have changed the direction of the post-Cold War international politics, also prompted the federal government to establish a unified national counter-terrorism system. The US national counter-terrorism strategy simultaneously follows two main lines: the "the reform of domestic counter-terrorism institutions" and "the international war on terrorism". Now, the US has been through 13 years of war on terrorism, showing two directly opposite situations: a great success in domestic counter-terrorism affairs and a deep trouble in international counter-terrorism affairs. The root causing this situation is as follows: domestically, the federal counter-terrorism institutions work with clear targets and efficiency; but internationally, the war against terrorism, lacking strategic deployment, is overstretched and confused in its targets.

I. The Evolution and Current Situation of the US Domestic Counter-

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terrorism Institutions

Before the 9/11 attacks, the US had experienced several domestic terrorist attacks which were implemented by organizations, including the Islamic extremist groups. But most of these terrorist activities came from domestic extremist organizations, such as "the Arizona Patriots", "the Oklahoma Constitutional militia" and so on. These extremist organizations, opposed to the US federal government, took measures of blowing up buildings of federal institutions, assassinating FBI agents and expelling Jews and other colored races to establish a nation of pure whites.

During this period of time, the US was still lacking a unified national counter-terrorism system at home. The reasons are: (1) the groups which took terrorist actions came from home. They targeted federal officials, and there were few terrorist attacks, thus causing limited social panics; (2) there were numerous federal government institutions in charge of counter-terrorism which are featured by unclearly defined authority and responsibilities, lacking a unified coordination mechanism. Therefore, it was necessary for the US to establish a unified national counter-terrorism system, but it is not urgent.

The serious consequences caused by 9/11 terrorist attacks exposed serious problems suffered by the US federal agencies: misconduct of the intelligence system before the event, lack of a unified command and coordination of the law enforcement agencies during the event, a chaos in rescue after the event. The root cause of these problems is: management from multiple departments, institutional overlapping and decentralization of powers. For example, before the attacks, many departments already were informed of relative information. But the overstaffed institutions and overlapping functions led to the situation that all departments deal with one thing together or shift responsibilities and have no one in charge of the matter. In this context, the US, drawing lessons from the bitter experience, rapidly carried out an institutional reform and established a unified national counter-terrorism system.

This counter-terrorism system, with the Department of Homeland Security at the core, integrates all the departments which are related to border control together. First, the US counter-terrorism structure is formed by three major systems, intelligence collection and analysis, federal law enforcement and post-attack rescue. Intelligence collection and analysis mainly executed by departments such as the CIA, the National Security Agency, the Department of Defense and other military counter-terrorism intelligence agencies and ultimately coordinated by the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis, is a costly network of intelligence analysis. The setting of such kind of costly institution is based on the managerial concept that "precautionary waste of money can save more than compensation afterwards". The focus of counter-terrorism is prevention instead of remedy afterwards. The early huge investment is to prevent larger losses after the incidents.

Second, the system of federal law enforcement is strengthened. This change has cast a tremendous impact on the US federal structure, implementing centralization on counter-terrorist law enforcement. It breaks the traditional decentralized federal structure, achieving a two-level vertical management of powers. The federal government can directly mobilize all local police forces where the incident takes place and thus is authorized an unprecedented power on national police, thereby forming a highly efficient system of counter-terrorist law enforcement.

Third, the system of post-attack rescue is established, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as the core. This system combines the US Department of Health, the Center of Disease Control and the Department of Energy. After nuclear or biological weapon attacks appear, it can rapidly mobilize professional rescue agencies to provide medical treatment for injured people and clean the environment so as to prevent secondary pollution which might cause more deaths.

This is an efficient but costly national counter-terrorism system. The US domestic target of counter-terrorism is clear, therefore it has outstanding

effect (of course it also benefits from the natural geographical advantage of the US: it is difficult for external terrorists to easily enter its soil). Apart from the isolated incident of Boston Bombing in 2013, during the past 13 years, no terrorist incident has been successfully implemented by domestic extremist groups or international terrorist organizations within the US. The attempted terrorist incident in Times Square of New York in 2010 further proved the power of the national counter-terrorism intelligence network.

However, although the system is effective, it also suffers many problems. First, the cost is prodigious; second, there are still problems of management from multiple departments, institutional overlap and power struggles which lead to shirking responsibilities; third, this kind of secret surveillance is built on the basis of a large-scale invasion of personal privacy, and the fourth, this set of monitoring system may be effective to organized terrorist actions, but for incidents in which individuals vent their anger, such as the murderous shootings, its vulnerabilities frequently occurs. At the same time, relying solely on law enforcement agencies cannot completely prevent or arrest the terrorists.

II. The Evolution and Current Situation of the US International Counter-terrorism Strategies

Compared to the domestic counter-terrorism which is clear in targets and strong in collaborations among different institutions, the US international counter-terrorism is currently in a very confused and complicated situation where more and more terrorist organizations and extremist forces appear after attacks are made on them. The reason is that at the beginning of the international war on terrorism, the US was overconfident about its superior post-cold War strength in politics, economics and military fields and intertwined the war on terrorism with other strategic deployments, leading to unclear targets of counter-terrorism and destroying the existing strategic balance in the Middle East. Since the Iraq War, the US has carried out the strategy of overthrowing the dictatorship in the Middle East. No matter sending

troops by itself or "leading from behind", the US international counter-terrorism strategy went further and further away from the track of "counter-terrorism", planting seeds that terrorist organizations have developed into a terrorist country such as ISIS.

Since 2001, the US international strategies have gone through roughly four stages: (1) the period of full expansion of the war on terrorism (2001-2005); (2) the period of strategic adjustment (2005-2011); (3) the period of strategic withdrawal (2011-2014); (4) the period of passive reaction to war (2014)

1. The full expansion of war on terrorism: from the fight against "terrorist groups" to the fight against "state sponsors of terrorism"

After the 9/11 attacks, the US rapidly launched the Afghanistan War with the target of fighting Al-Qaeda and overthrowing the Taliban regime. This is a "war on terrorism" in the strict sense and received unprecedented support from the international public opinion. In 2002, after the Taliban regime was overthrown in Afghanistan, the Bush administration came up with the idea that "The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination." This is the period of comprehensive war on terrorism when the US enlarged the target of fighting al-Qaeda to overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and even the Iranian regime, the nature of the war on terrorism changed dramatically. Its characteristic is implementing "preemptive action" strategies to the "sate sponsors of terrorism", destroying "[them] attempt to gain or use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or their precursors" and completely eliminating its threat to the US national security. The George W. Bush administration maintained a tough stance of "you are either with us, or against us" in response to the questions of the international public opinion and even advanced the Iraq War with the determination of publicly breaking up with traditional allies such as France, leading to a shaky international counter-terrorism alliance. This

is the beginning when the US war on terrorism is off the track of counter-terrorism.

2. The period of strategic adjustment: returning to the strategy of striking "terrorist organizations"

Years of implementation of the strategy of fighting "state sponsors of terrorism" caused: the US military to be bogged down deeper and deeper in the Iraq War, the counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan could not be ended in a short term, various terrorist forces which are related to Al-Qaida spread rapidly in Middle East and North Africa, Islamic extremist organizations (such as the Jihad) continued to grow. More importantly, after Saddam's regime was cracked down, the fragile strategic balance in the Middle East which lasted for many years was broken and the buffer zone between Israel and Iran disappeared, the Middle East being into an unprecedented turmoil again. The Bush administration began to realize that the America's war on terrorism was overstretched. The war could not be ended with the sole effort of the US. Therefore, it began to repair relations with traditional allies and redefine the objects of counter-terrorism, to wit more than 20 terrorist organizations and Islamic extremist groups including Al-Qaida. It also cleared for the first time that it was the Islamic "extremism" that the US wanted to crack down rather than the Islamic "religion", preventing the "pan-Islamism" of the targets.

3. The period of strategic withdrawal: lead from behind

In 2011, the Obama administration fully withdrew troops from Iraq, marking the start of the strategic withdrawal of the US war on terrorism. The withdrawal indicates that the US changes to "lead from behind" instead of the end of the war on terrorism. The US took promoting and establishing western democracies in the "Great Arabian" of Middle East and North Africa as its preferred choice of strategy to eradicate terrorism in that region. After the occurrence of "Arab Spring", the Gaddafi regime became the first regime to be cracked down by military

attacks after the US implemented the strategy of "leading from behind". Assad government in Syria became the second target after Libya in the name of counter-terrorism when the US "leads from behind". The vulnerable stable situation in the region of Middle East and North Africa was broken again. Various Islamic extremist organizations and terrorist organizations continuously emerged, leading to the vicious incident that the US ambassador to Libya was killed by armed extremist groups. More seriously, the unexpected rapid rise of the extreme terrorism forces ISIS pulled the US on the stage again.

4. The period of passive reaction to the war again: proxy war targeting at ISIS

ISIS, used to be a derivative of the Al-Qaeda, had indirectly accepted assistance in weapons from western countries such as the US and participated in the civil war to overthrow the Syrian government. Due to the complicated factors of religion and internal conflicts, ISIS turned its guns to advance to a power vacuum region at the border between Syria and Iraq, rattling all the way and gradually approaching Baghdad. Baghdadi, leader of the ISIS, calling himself "Caliph", announced the establishment of "The Islamic State". ISIS massacred civilians and prisoners of war by extremely bloody means and brutally killed US and British citizens who were captured in Syria and other places. More seriously, "The Islamic State" recruited Islamic fighters across the world through brainwashing propaganda. Muslims in the US and some European countries flocked to "The Islamic State" to fight against the Iraqi government forces and returned to their countries of nationality, posing potential terrorist threats to these countries. Since the Islamic State appears in the form of a nation with solid local government structures and oil resources, it poses a serious threat to the entire Western countries and their national security. "The Islamic State" has become the major counter-terrorism target of the US at the current stage.

Due to the earlier rush withdrawal of the US military from Iraq, facing the

powerful offensive of "The Islamic State" and the continuous retreats of the Iraqi government forces in retreat, the US, not able to send ground troops to return to Iraq, can only passively react to fight. In September 2014, the Obama administration launched a counter-terrorism strategy of passive reaction with the target of fighting against the ISIS, which included four major factors: air strikes, proxy war (military support to the Kurdish resistance groups), collection of counter-terrorism information and cutting off the Islamic State's international finance channel, implementation of humanitarian assistance in the occupied areas.

This counter-terrorism strategy of the US is still under adjustment at present and its specific effect is yet to be seen. What is sure is that it is quite unlikely that terrorist attacks take place in the US homeland. But the US international counter-terrorism strategy is continued to be confused in is targets which is featured by two extreme ways: either operating independently regardless of the cost or fighting a big proxy war by leading from behind. Both the passive reaction to war and the proxy war may easily lead to the situation of "as soon as one problem is solved, another rears its ugly head". It can be expected that dealing with the ISIS with Kurdish by means of proxy war will fall into a new round of dilemma: the failure would lead to a much stronger "Islamic State" while the victory means the rise of an armed Kurdish forces which will again break the extremely fragile strategic balance in the Middle East. The rise of the Kurdish, who long suffered repression from the Turkish, will cause great fear in Turkey. The US will also be inevitably forced into a more complex chaotic abyss in the Middle East.