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Eleven Years Later: U.S. Should Not Lose Momentum in the War on Terrorism

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Last year, in the run-up to the 10th anniversary of 9/11, the Obama Administration released its new National Strategy for Counterterrorism.¹ Under the new strategy, the Administration seeks to treat terrorism under (1) a law enforcement paradigm that failed to protect Americans from terrorism when it was adopted by the Clinton Administration before 9/11 and (2) a “small footprint” policy for overseas operations. Following this strategy threatens to cede momentum in the war on terrorism and augment the terrorist threat against the U.S.

One year later, the U.S. counterterrorism strategy remains flawed. The U.S. needs to name its enemies, maintain the nation’s commitments abroad, fully fund the military, reach out to allies, and truly defend the home front.²

Terrorist Safe Havens and Commitments Abroad. In April, the U.S. and Afghanistan concluded a landmark Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) laying a broad framework for relations between the two nations after the U.S. and NATO withdraw combat troops by the close of 2014. While the SPA does not specify future U.S. funding amounts or troop levels, it does offer a broad U.S. commitment to support Afghanistan financially and bolster democratic institutions and civil society through 2024. It also provides a framework for the U.S. to maintain a residual presence to train Afghan forces and conduct counterterrorism missions.

While the SPA helps to demonstrate a continued diplomatic and financial commitment to Afghanistan, racing to remove combat troops from the country before the mission is accomplished could precipitate a civil war and lead to conditions that allow al-Qaeda to re-establish its base there.

The U.S. needs to clarify its goals in Afghanistan and be more consistent in its messaging to Pakistan. Pakistan, for its part, continues to serve as a safe haven for terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Taliban, and the Haqqani network, threatening to jeopardize

everything the U.S. has fought for in Afghanistan since 9/11. The U.S. should put forward terms for the U.S.–Pakistan relationship and make it clear that Pakistani failure to cooperate with the U.S.-led strategy in Afghanistan and to take action against terrorist sanctuaries within its borders will result in decreased U.S. military aid and diplomatic engagement. The Administration’s recent decision to declare the Haqqani network a foreign terrorist organization is a step in the right direction.

The U.S. should also continue to use drone strikes as necessary. The Administration’s stepped-up drone campaign in Pakistan’s tribal border areas, for example, has helped to disrupt al-Qaeda operations and planning. Drones are a highly effective counterterrorism tool, but they should be part of a broader strategy that includes uprooting extremist ideologies that support terrorism, collecting information from captured terrorists, and convincing the Pakistanis to conduct joint operations that deal with the threat.

The State of the Military and U.S. Missile Defense. A year later, sequestration looms nearer. If Congress does not act, on January 2, 2013, across-the-board cuts will

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go into place. For the defense budget, this means additional half-trillion-dollar cuts on top of the large defense reductions that have already taken place. The Department of Defense has absorbed a \$400 billion cut (called “efficiencies”) under former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Current Secretary Leon Panetta has had to cut over \$400 billion pursuant to the Budget Control Act of 2011.

The defense budget has already absorbed about half of all spending cuts even though it represents less than a fifth of the federal budget. If the Obama Administration continues to weaken U.S. forces, the country will be unable to maintain its superpower status.

As the U.S. withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan, the world is not becoming a safer place. Iran and North Korea continue to invest in capabilities designed to kill Americans and their allies. Syria is wracked by civil war and has the potential to destabilize the entire Middle East. The world order relies on the U.S. being able to project its stabilizing presence. Yet President Obama’s current policies are undermining the very capabilities that make power projection possible.

The U.S. should adopt a “protect and defend” strategy with a mix of offensive (conventional and nuclear) and defensive (active and passive) forces. Despite the increasing spread of ballistic missile technologies, the Administration has proposed a

woefully inadequate missile defense budget and has canceled some of the most promising missile defense programs, including the Multiple Kill Vehicle, Airborne Laser, and Energy Kinetic Interceptor.

The U.S. remains the only nuclear-armed country without a substantive nuclear weapons modernization program. President Obama’s policy is preventing the U.S. from developing a nuclear arsenal capable of threatening what state sponsors of terrorism value: their own survival and means of threatening their neighbors and oppressing their citizens.

Protecting the Homeland. In the past year, at least six Islamist-inspired terrorist plots aimed at the U.S. have been thwarted, bringing the total number of terrorist plots foiled since 9/11 to at least 51.³ The fact that the U.S. has not seen a large-scale successful attack since 9/11 truly speaks to the successes of the nation’s law enforcement and counterterrorism enterprise. More, however, can be done to strengthen these efforts.

- Despite the persistent threat of terrorism, the Administration continues to treat it under a law enforcement paradigm that focuses on reactive policies and prosecuting terrorists rather than proactive efforts to enhance intelligence tools and thwart terrorist attempts long before the public is in danger. This strategy fails to

recognize the true nature of the threat posed by terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab) and state-sponsored terrorism.

- U.S. leadership should also recognize that thwarting terrorist travel and financing remains the most effective way to protect the homeland. On the one hand, this means expanding programs such as Secure Flight and the Visa Waiver Program, which allow citizens of member countries to travel to the U.S. for up to 90 days without a visa and also help to prevent terrorists and other dangerous travelers from entering the U.S. by pre-screening passengers and requiring greater information sharing between the U.S. and member countries.
- At the same time, the U.S. should also create a lawful detainment framework for the incapacitation and lawful interrogation of terrorists to ensure that valuable and necessary intelligence can be obtained. This should be coupled with efforts to preserve existing counterterrorism and intelligence tools, such as the PATRIOT Act. Ensuring that U.S. counterterrorism and law enforcement officials have vital intelligence is essential to thwarting terrorist plots.

The Future of America’s Counterterrorism Strategy. It has

1. The White House, “National Strategy for Counterterrorism,” June 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf (accessed September 6, 2012).

2. The Heritage Foundation Counterterrorism Task Force, “A Counterterrorism Strategy for the ‘Next Wave,’” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 98, August 24, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/a-counterterrorism-strategy-for-the-next-wave>.

3. James Jay Carafano, Steven Bucci, and Jessica Zuckerman, “Fifty Terror Plots Foiled Since 9/11: The Homegrown Threat and the Long War on Terrorism,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2682, April 25, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/04/fifty-terror-plots-foiled-since-9-11-the-homegrown-threat-and-the-long-war-on-terrorism>; and Steven Bucci and Jessica Zuckerman, “51st Terrorist Plot Against the United States: Continued Threat of al-Qaeda and Affiliates,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3598, May 8, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/05/51st-bomb-terror-plot-proves-continued-threat-of-al-qaeda>.

been 11 years since the tragedy of 9/11. While the U.S. has made great strides, the threat of terrorism has not yet abated. Both at home and abroad, America needs an enduring and sustainable counterterrorism enterprise capable of responding to future emerging threats.

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