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Catastrophic Counterterrorism as Catastrophe

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Abstract. This article posits three very noxious consequences of common counterterrorism approaches to catastrophic terrorism that are gaining currency in international foreign policy communities.

Catastrophic terrorism as employed in international foreign policy communities denotes four main aspects. First, there's the employment or threat to illegally employ some combination of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons as well as cyberweapons--e.g., distorting software on which a community's social service infrastructure depends. Second, the employment is either illegal or perpetrated by political entities that are not authorized or sanctioned for employment. Third, the employment is intended to achieve political objectives even if--or especially if--the objectives appear to be nihilistic, anarchistic, or somehow postmodern. Fourth, a psychological consequence to the physical survivors--viz., political decision-makers--is crucial to the terrorist perpetrator's attainment of political objectives.

Common counterterrorism approaches to catastrophic terrorism comprise novel and renewed efforts to (1) obtain, process, analyze, produce, and disseminate more and more different kinds of information; (2) develop, produce, field, and employ more and more different kinds of military, paramilitary, police, medical, transportation, and communications materiel; (3) develop and implement more and more different kinds of staffing, coordination, and management systems; (4) plan and implement more and more different kinds of antiterrorism and counterterrorism training, exercises, and simulations involving more and more different kinds of people; and (5) create more and more different kinds--even if disguised via principles of integration, centralization, and/or their opposites--of operational and support counterterrorist organizations. This last aspect also involves the coopting of some functions of existing organizations currently having little counterterrorist *raison d'etre*.

There are three very noxious consequences of such common counterterrorism approaches to catastrophic terrorism. First, there is the cost factor. A government, government-sponsored organization, or nongovernmental agency--local, national, regional, global--possesses only so much in the way of financial and other pertinent assets. For what it would conceivably take to effect these approaches, many other viable needs and interests--domestic and foreign--would inevitably be slighted to the significant detriment of many people. Second, civil liberties would be significantly constrained and violated in effecting these counterterrorist approaches. In essence, proponents would be killing freedom to save it. Thirdly, effecting these counterterrorist approaches would necessarily create an ongoing, free-floating sense of dread among a population of what is most likely a low-probability event that varies in severity from insignificant on the one hand to nowhere near a 1950s version of a nuclear holocaust on the other. On the severity scale, events characterized by the low end would be of a much higher frequency than events on the high end. Yet his dread would be a new and permanent feature of life.

Terrorism against representative democracies is largely about destroying them, and the goal seems more imminent with the threat of catastrophic terrorism. The best and the brightest plans of the counterterrorists seem to be a vehicle to that end. (See Bar-Tal, D., & Jacobson, D. (1998). A

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psychological perspective on security. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 47, 59-71; Carter, A., Deutch, J., & Zelikow, P. (November/December 1998). Catastrophic terrorism. *Foreign Affairs*, 77(6); Kliewer, W., Fearnow, M.D., & Walton, M.N. (1998). Dispositional, environmental, and context-specific predictors of children's threat perceptions in everyday stressful situations. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27, 83-100; Lewis, F. (February 4, 1999). The new anti-terrorism. *The New York Review of Books*, 46(2), 24; Steinbruner, J.D. (Winter 1997-1998). Biological weapons. *Foreign Policy*, 107.) (Keywords: Catastrophic Terrorism, Counterterrorism.)