



Research Article

United States of America's Counterterrorism Policy and the Evolution of Global Threats

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ABSTRACT

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The research question explored in this paper is how the counter-terrorism (CT) policy of the United States has grown over the years in response to changing global order in a manner that is prompted by a critical evaluation of the traditional security policies as part of the growing dynamics of hybrid and non-traditional threats. It assesses the way U.S. strategies have evolved to be less militarized in the post-9/11 paradigm to consider a growing range of threats, such as cyberterrorism, domestic extremism, and strategic competition with state actors, such as Russia and China. The main objective is to determine the consistency, flexibility, and effectiveness of the U.S. counter-terrorism policies and strike a balance between the national security demands and democratic principles. The research methodology is qualitative, based on document-based research, combining policy documents, academic literature, and case studies. It is theoretically grounded by Realism, Constructivism and Securitization Theory that explain how power interacts, how identities are formed and how security threats are framed which in turn enables one to see how perception regarding threats is socially constructed and subsequently affects policy responses. Results show that, despite the U.S. CT efforts disrupting international terrorist networks, it is still disjointed across administrations, overly dependent on military tools, and is ever more out of sync with the emergence of domestic and cyber-based threats. The strategic effectiveness is also undermined by trade-offs of civil liberties, institutional inertia and inconsistent multilateral participation. The paper will end with a recommendation of a whole-of-government approach based on prevention, resiliency, oversight, and multilateral coordination. The democratic accountability and adaptability should be prioritised in future policies in order to maintain the efficacy in an increasingly multipolar and digitised threat environment.

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Introduction

Since the September 11, 2001 meeting, the United States has restructured its national security architecture to deal with an ever-changing and multi-layered threat complex of international assaults. Having initially focused on destroying al-Qaeda and other Islamist militant groups with military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. policy on counter-terrorism now has to do with cyberterrorism, extremism within its own borders, and geopolitical challenges posed by state actors (Byman, 2020). Unparalleled international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and institutionalisation of counter-terrorism in both domestic and international legal systems was catalysed by the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (Cronin, 2019). However, the threat environment has become more varied, as ISIS, white-supremacist terrorism, and digital radicalisation have emerged and pose new strategic and ethical threats to policymakers (Neumann, 2017).

In spite of the heavy investment that has been done in counter-terrorism over the last twenty years, there has been a consistent problem of matching the U.S. strategy to the emerging global threats. Traditional methods such as military action, drone

killings and surveillance are criticised because they lack the ability to deal with decentralised, technologically empowered varieties of terror. In addition, the growing blurred lines between counter-terrorism, great-power competition, and cybersecurity have made the policy coherence more difficult. One important question is to see how the U.S. counter-terrorism can be effective, legitimate, and responsive within an environment marked by fluid, ideologically diverse, and transnational threats (Miller, 2021).

The key questions of this study are to trace the historical multiplication of the U.S. counter-terrorism policy since 9/11, to evaluate how well U.S. policy has been adjusted to the dynamic nature of the global threats and to understand how international co-operation can increase or limit the success of U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. The paper also seeks to define policy loopholes and to offer suggestions as to more adaptive and comprehensive solutions. This research not only contributes to the on-going discussions about national security, global governance, and the role of the United States in maintaining the international order but also introduces a timely policy dilemma, which is how to deal with counter-terrorism in a world in which security threats do not fit into the traditional categories. The results will serve to guide the

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formulation of future strategies, as well as give a guideline on how to balance security requirements with democracy and international standards.

The paper is concentrated largely on the U.S. federal counter-terrorism policies of 2001-2025 in the external (e.g., international terrorism, alliances) and internal (e.g., domestic extremism, policy institutions) dimensions. Due to the size of the subject, the research does not provide a comprehensive overview of all the operational cases and actors. Rather, it takes a thematic and strategic approach with a focus on the key policy alternations and illustrative examples.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical conceptualization of the U.S. counter-terrorism policy enables a critical examination of its incentives, priorities and effects. Realism, Constructivism and Securitisation Theory are three main methods that provide complimentary answers to the way the United States frames and answers the threat of global security.

Realism is one of the fundamental theories of international relations, which presupposes the anarchic nature of the international system and the politics of power. States are rational beings and aim at maximising their survival and security in a competitive environment. In this sense, U.S. counter-terrorism policy can be seen primarily as the reaction to the threat to national sovereignty and international influence. Realism describes the reason why the United States has often supported unilateral military policies, including the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, drone killing, and massive defence spending, to establish strategic superiority (Mearsheimer, 2001). Realism in the post-9/11 period took the form of how terrorism is framed as a threat to existence and pursues solutions that are power-based without the need to seek a multilateral agreement. The idea of pre-empting threats before they become a reality is also supported by realist thinking, and this can be seen in the Bush doctrine. Although this could be a successful strategy, as far as there is a short-term improvement in security the critics cite that there would be a danger of putting the international norms at risk as well as causing long-term instability.

The constructivism shifts the attention of material power to the contributions of ideas, norms, identities, and discourse to the formation of international behaviour. It is based on the notion that threats are socially constructed rather than objective based on the context of politics and history. In the U.S. example, constructivism would explain the fact that the War on Terror has become a dominant discourse in the wake of 9/11 which defined the domestic and foreign policy by the use of language and symbols (Jackson, 2005). Constructivist researchers stress that the United States presentation of terrorism as a global evil created a moral dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism which justified extraordinary security action and military actions. This theoretical approach is also useful to understand how the concept of terrorism has changed over time, why we have interpreted radicalisation, and why some threats to humanity like white-nationalist terrorism were largely not prioritized historically when they have become increasingly important.

The Copenhagen School of thought has been proponent of the securitization theory, which provides a solid analytical instrument in explaining the construction of security threats. It claims that security is a speech act and not a reality; a threat is securitized when political elites manage to establish a rhetorical representation of it as an existential threat that requires exceptional action (Buzan, Waever, and de Woude, 1998). This theoretical focus would be especially relevant in the post-9/11 American policy, where terrorism was securitized to justify extraordinary legal, military, and surveillance powers, such as

indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay and widespread surveillance in the United States under the PATRIOT Act. Furthermore, the theory of securitization aids in criticizing the process of normalizing the states of exception, silencing of dissent and the distraction of the democratic accountability in the discourse of the populace. The theory encourages the question of who determines the concept of security, whose voices are silenced, and the costs of democracy under the rubric of safety by anticipating the selectivity of counterterrorism, in these ways: unsafe areas are selectively reported on, the process is institutionalized in identity politics, race, and ideology.

All of these three theoretical frameworks produce a multi-dimensional insight into U.S. counter-terrorism. Realism prefigures strategic action and motivation based on power and national interests; Constructivism underlines the importance of ideas and identity in threat construction and securitization theory explains that social construction and politicisation of security. The two form a depth of analytical insight and help to shed light on the conflict between protection, legitimacy and liberty in current counterterrorism policy.

Literature review

Historical development of U.S. counterterrorism policy

The U.S. counterterrorism policy has been developing in the form of an active interaction between strategic doctrine, priorities of the leadership, and international security changes. The United States also took a unilateral, pre-emptive approach under the administration of President George W. Bush, and this approach was represented in the Bush doctrine, which gave justifications to invasion into Afghanistan and Iraq on the basis of pre-emption (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003). President Obama moved to multilateralism and focusing on the precision of technologies, specifically increasing drone attacks and special operations and decreasing troop presence. President Trump has prioritized the use of maximum pressure campaigns (especially against Iran and the remaining ISIS), especially through military deterrence and strict immigration policies. Meanwhile, President Biden has oriented counterterrorism to diplomacy, alliance-building, and dealing with the so-called over-the-horizon threats, including cyberattacks and lone-wolf extremism, and supervising an Afghanistan withdrawal. This policy development highlights the fact that counterterrorism is not simply a reaction to the danger, but even to the extended strategic goals and political aspirations.

Since 9/11, terrorism across the world has significantly changed. Transnational jihadist organisations like al-Qaeda and subsequently ISIS dominated the first part of the 2000s, using mass-casualty tactics and controlling the territory over much of the Middle East and North Africa. Over the past few years, these threats have become decentralised and terrorism has taken the form of a hybrid that encompasses cyberterrorism, digital radicalisation as well as domestic violent extremism (Clarke and Knake, 2019). The convergence of terrorism and great-power rivalry especially between China and Russia has also complicated the scene. These state and non-state actors have now exploited disinformation, economic leverage, and cyber capabilities and technologies that make it difficult to draw the line between classical warfare and terrorism (Brands and Byman, 2021). Accordingly, the United States security environment requires that it responds to kinetic and non-kinetic threats in different domains.

The U.S. counterterrorism policy has faced a lot of criticism on its effectiveness, legality and ethics implication. Critics believe that excessive use of military solutions, such as drone strikes, has not only caused civilian deaths, but has eroded the U.S. credibility and led to radicalisation of the concerned regions (Boyle, 2015).

Other people point out that civil liberties are being undermined in the name of surveillance programmes like the PRISM programme fronted by the NSA, and it raises the issue of the struggle between security and liberty.

Racialised and Islamophobic aspects of counterterrorist legislation and practices are also a source of ongoing concern as it unfairly targets Muslim populations in the majority of cases yet tends to overlook white supremacist threats. Moreover, researchers and policymakers also argue on the strategic integrity of the U.S. response, with a lack of inter-agency unity and the understanding of underlying cause levels of poverty, governance and political marginalization.

Case studies

American policy in relation to the extremist Islamists

The post-9/11 counterterrorism environment has been greatly characterized by the U.S. reaction towards the Islamist extremist factions, mainly the al-Qaeda and later the ISIS. The US implemented a global military policy that involved the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 under the logic of pre-emptive war explained by the Bush Doctrine. This was succeeded by the shift to the drone warfare and special operations by President Obama towards the high-value terrorist leaders in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan (Byman, 2016). Although the efforts achieved a lot in terms of weakening the leadership of al-Qaeda and the territory of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, they also created some complicated long-term outcomes, such as the instability of the region, the loss of civilian lives, and the attraction of propagandists. The 2021 American pullout in Afghanistan was a strategic change and indicated the threat of rebellious safe haven resurgence (Jones, 2021). It also put to test the capability of over-the-horizon counterterrorism approaches where the strategies are grounded on intelligence, airstrikes, and regional alliances as opposed to ground deployments.

Over the past few years, the United States has redefined its national security interests to strategic rivalry with Russia and China, in the 2017 and 2022 National Security Strategies. The implication of such a pivot on counterterrorism (CT) is significant, especially in terms of distribution of resources, diplomatic resources, and defence priorities (Brands and Gaddis, 2018). The focus on traditional deterrence and cyber competition will jeopardize the priorities of CT funding and preparedness, in particular, the areas of the Sahel or Southeast Asia where terrorist networks have not been eliminated. The growing international presence of China and destabilising actions of Russia, including Syria and Africa, directly affect the CT policy as well. The counterterrorism interests of these states frequently oppose the U.S. interests or the unity of multilateral relations (Rumer, 2019). Given the increasing great-power rivalry, CT policy needs to evolve so that it can be aware of blind spots in its strategies and be able to feel the global situation.

Domestic Terrorism and White Supremacy on the Rise

The last ten years have been characterized by a significant increase in domestic terrorism in the United States, whose driving force is white supremacist and anti-government ideology. The Charlottesville rally (2017) and the Capitol insurrection (2021) have highlighted that home-grown violent extremist have become a significant threat. The FBI and the DHS have now classified white supremacist violence as the most continuous and deadly form of domestic violence (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020). However, the current U.S. counter-terrorism tools were initially designed to deal with external challenges, leading to shortcomings in the legal tools and intelligence systems as well as political intent to deal with domestic extremism. It has been claimed by scholars that domestic threats in the past have been

under-identified and under-invested compared to the Islamist terrorism. The ongoing policy discussions are whether or not the CT statutes need to be extended to include domestic terrorism labels and how they can do so without trampling upon civil liberties and enabling political abuse (Levitt, 2021).

Cyberterrorism and Hybrid Threats

The cyber evolution of war has presented new hybrid threats such as cyberterrorism, disinformation, and the use of encrypted systems to recruit and organize. Cyberspace is now abused by non-state actors as the means of not only communication but also hacking critical infrastructure, disabling services, and spreading panic, further confusing the line between traditional terrorism and cybercrime (Clarke and Knake, 2019). Moreover, governments like Russia and Iran have been accused of backing or imitating the terror techniques into the cyber world to disrupt the U.S. security and democratic structures. Cyber operations and psychological warfare are coming together strategically, as incidents such as the SolarWinds breach or campaigns of election-related disinformation show, and it requires an all-encompassing counter-terrorism and cyber-defense posture. The main obstacles are the problem of attribution, the legal frameworks and the definition of terror and its transformations in the digital age.

U.S. Multilateral Relations and the UN, NATO, GCTF

The contribution made by multilateral institutions in the establishment of the global counter-terrorism architecture cannot be ignored. The United Nations Counterterrorism Committee (CTC), NATO, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), and the United States have been working closely to develop a legal norm, share intelligence, and offer capacity-building assistance to weak states (Kittner, 2017). Although the initial U.S. counterterrorism initiatives were mostly unilateral, recent regimes, especially the Obama and Biden administrations have emphasized the importance of building coalitions and multilateralism. The involvement of NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. lobbying of UN Security Council resolutions on financing of terrorism and foreign fighters is a good example of this cooperative shift. However, geopolitical conflicts and the variances in the legal standards across member states have sometimes hampered the efficiency and homogeneity of these efforts.

Analysis and Discussion

Coherence and Adaptability of Policies

One of the most self-repeated criticisms regarding U.S. counter-terrorism policy is that the policy has been inconsistent in implementation between administrations and has been unable to keep up with the constantly changing threat landscape. Initial post-9/11 policies were rooted in global militarism and preemption, and later it shifted between rhetoric and operational focus with the Obama administration basing her policies on drone-strikes, the Trump administration on maximum pressure, and the Biden administration on multilateral relations (Cronin, 2011). It can disrupt long-term threat mitigation and confuse international partners because of such policy volatility.

Although there have been institutional changes such as establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), inter-agency competition as well as a lack of cohesion in strategy has limited the policy coherence. The incapacity to maintain balance between long term strategic goals and short-term tactical activities has brought questions of sustainability and effectiveness (Zegart, 2007). A strategy of improving the alignment of intelligence checks and strategic planning with the implementation mechanisms will be important in enhancing the adaptability of U.S. policy.

The U.S. experience with countering terrorism demonstrates that there is a complicated interplay of the kinetic (military) and non-kinetic (diplomatic, economic, ideological) tools. Military action has been effective at both degrading terrorist leadership and disruption of networks (e.g., the killing of Osama bin Laden), but has also created blowback, civilian loss of life, and governance vacuums, which have in turn become exploited by extremist groups (Byman, 2016).

On the other hand, non-military efforts, including Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts, development assistance, multilateral intelligence collaboration, among others, have demonstrated potential in mitigating the root cause, but have been challenging to measure success. The strength and deterrence debate has been one of the major focuses and evidence indicates that whole-of-government strategy is much more effective than the sole application of military primacy (Jones and Libicki, 2008).

Counterterrorism and Civil Liberties

Counter-terrorism actions following the 9/11 incidents have caused great apprehension in the area of civil liberty erosion, especially with the adoption of the USA PATRIOT Act, mass surveillance, indefinite imprisonment, and targeted assassinations. These tools seem to have enabled the enhanced level of national security, but they also put the constitutional guarantees and the accountability of democracy at the same time (Ackerman, 2006). Citizens no longer trust the government because of the news about domestic surveillance programs (e.g., Snowden exposures), racial and religious profiling, and the broadening of the executive powers. The dilemma is to find a realistic balance between the freedom and safety, and consequently to make sure that counter-terrorism operation does not turn into the tool of dictatorship or social division. Strong judicial checks and balances, openness and congressional scrutiny is an invaluable protection.

The U.S. counter-terrorism policy has played a major role to govern the international security rule by exporting norms, practices, and law to the arena, such as the labeling of foreign terrorist groups and the use of drone warfare. Although the United States tends to set the global agenda, its unilateral measures, like extraordinary renditions or military attacks without UN permission, have sometimes compromised international legitimacy (Bannelier-Christakis, 2016). On the other hand, U.S. participation in multilateral forums such as UN Counter-Terrorism Committee and the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS has shown its ability to play a positive role in collective security operations. The changing significance of the threat environment (including cyber-terrorism, domestic extremism, and hybrid warfare) requires the redefinition of global counter-terrorism governance, with the United States playing a central role in defining inclusive, legal, and cooperative norms.

U.S. counter-terrorism policy in the future should take into consideration an increasingly multipolar world, technological upheaval, and an expanded definition of threats. The United States should address domestic extremism, cyber threats, and strategic rivalry with state actors like Russia and China than continue to focus on transnational extremism in terrorism only (Jasper, 2020). An expediency plan ought to focus on modernizing intelligence, building resilience, partnerships between the government and business, and legal amendment in order to better respond to the modern and future threats. Notably, the US strategy needs to be congruent with the rule-of-law principles and human rights to maintain moral legitimacy both locally and in the foreign arena. The focus must be put on preventive actions and resistance rather than countermeasures.

Major Findings Discussion

An overview of the U.S. counterterrorism policy since the response to changing global threats has a number of major findings. The U.S. counterterrorism policy does not have long-term coherence because of the constant inversion of the doctrine between administrations. When the Bush administration favored preemptive military attack, Obama administration banked on drone warfare and multilateral diplomacy. The changes of Trump and Biden are based on opposing opinions on international activity and domestic orientation, which leads to the continuity of operations and trust in alliances (Cronin, 2011; Byman, 2016). Even though there has been increased recognition of the socio-political causes of terrorism, the U.S. policy has continued to rely excessively on military means. The consequences are short-term strategic victory (e.g., specific assassinations of al-Qaeda leaders) and long-term turmoil in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya (Jones and Libicki, 2008).

The institutional response mechanisms have lagged behind the increase of the white supremacist and anti-government violence. Historically designed to fight external jihadist challenges, current counterterrorism systems have become unsuitable to domestic radicalization (Levitt, 2021; DHS, 2020). The new threats of cyberterrorism, disinformation, and hybrid warfare are changing the conventional definitions of CT and response models. The ambiguousness and decentralization of digital threats makes it hard to allocate them, prevent them, and comply with the law on a national level (Clarke and Knake, 2019). Although the U.S. has facilitated the formation of CT partnerships at the global level via the UN, NATO and GCTF, geopolitical competitions, as well as sovereignty issues, curtail their success. In addition, unilateralism has occasionally compromised multilateral legitimacy and international standards (Bannelier-Christakis, 2016). Counterterrorism operations, especially those that came after September 11, have often been accused of violating civil liberties. Striking the right balance between the security and individual rights is a policy issue that has not yet reached its solution (Ackerman, 2006).

Literature Review Gaps

The vast majority of literature considers domestic and international terrorism as different spheres. But the hybrid threats, e.g., foreign-backed domestic extremism or ideologically transnational groups are under-researched under integrated analytical frameworks. Comparative longitudinal research comparing the performance of CT measures in various U.S. presidential regimes with homogenous measures (such as mitigation of threats, civilians killed, alliance unified) is lacking.

Although the multilateral efforts seem to be the most emphasized, little research critically evaluates the viability of operations, political coherence, or unforeseen outcomes of global anti-terrorist alliances and organizations. Cyberterrorism theoretical and empirical studies are still in the infancy. The vast majority of research is devoted to cybercrime or state cyberwar, and the insufficiency of knowledge exists regarding the ways in which non-state entities use digital technologies to frighten or disrupt.

The literature does not pay much attention to the effects of the counterterrorism approach on gender relations, civil society and marginal communities both nationally and internationally, especially in terms of surveillance, profiling and displacement. CVE strategies are commonly cited in policy reports although there is limited rigorous field-based analysis of their effectiveness, scalability or cultural suitability in different settings.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations.

Summary

This paper has explored the history of the U.S. counterterrorism (CT) policy within the dynamics of the global and domestic threat environments. Since the after 9/11 militarized policy to modern-day concerns over multilateralism and domestic extremism, the U.S. policy has been radically changed. The review revealed the following critical periods: unilateralism and preemptive principle of the Bush administration; targeted killings and soft-power priorities of the Obama administration; the emphasis on maximum pressure and border security of the Trump administration; a re-evaluation of the multilateral diplomacy and internal threats of the Biden administration.

At the same time, global threats have evolved, not only the al-Qaeda and ISIS, but also cyberterrorism, white-supremacist violence, and geopolitical threats of Russia and China. The CT landscape is further complicated by institutional fragmentation, normative conflicts between security and civil liberties, and disproportionate global coordination. The paper used theoretical frameworks such as realism, constructivism, and the securitization theory to question the role of power, identity, and discursive framing in determining the agenda of counterterrorism. The lack of effectiveness of military-centric responses and the necessity to use comprehensive, adaptive strategies are highlighted through case studies and empirical evidence.

Conclusion

The history of the development of the U.S. counterterrorism policy can be characterized by the presence of strategic ingenuity and systemic flaws. Though the U.S has shown that it is capable of countering major threats by terrorists, this achievement has been at the expense of civil liberties, international credibility, and long-term global security alliances. Appearing non-traditional threats, especially domestic extremism and cyberterrorism necessitate a shift in the paradigm of reactive force to proactive, integrative force along security lines.

In order to be effective and legitimate in a dynamic threat environment, the U.S. CT policy needs to adopt long-term, multidimensional planning that is able to cross the divide between domestic and international that focuses on human rights and modernizes institutional capacity. The present-day policy landscape provides a challenge and an opportunity to re-align the nations response to counterterrorism in the multipolar digital interconnected world.

Recommendations

Develop a combined framework to deal with the merge of domestic extremism, cyberterrorism operations and foreign influence operations, to make sure that there is interagency cooperation and alignment of resources.

Establish bipartisan principles of counterterrorism entrenched in congressional structures to minimize strategic volatility and create international trust in the pledges of the U.S.

Make congress and courts more vigilant over surveillance programmes, targeted killings and detention policies; give more priority to transparency, due process and trust in the community as a way of being democratically legit.

Invest more in CVE activities, education, and other socio-economic programs that mitigate the causes of radicalization, in the domestic and overseas front.

Reinvest in international bodies like UN, NATO and GCTF through reforms, equitable burden sharing and legal clarity to gain legitimacy and collaboration.

Infrastructure upgrade and establish strong public- private collaboration to detect and counteract disinformation threats and resilience to digitally enabled terrorism.

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