The Impact of Psychological-Cultural Factors on Concepts of Fighting Terrorism

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how counterterrorism measures and policy are shaped by the national frame of reference of a country, here in particular the United States. This insight is important not only in the interpretation of political developments but also in the formulation of policy responding to these developments. A better awareness of the influence of the American national reference frame can aid policy makers to formulate effective and constructive policy.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show how counterterrorism measures and policy are shaped by the *national frame of reference* of a country, here in particular the United States. This insight is important not only in the interpretation of political developments but also in the formulation of policy responding to these developments. A better awareness of the influence of the American national reference frame can aid policy makers to formulate effective and constructive policy.

The national reference frame is made up of factors such as the national identity, the national self-image und self-understanding as well as patterns of threat perception. Since these factors are distinct among countries, differences in interpretation and policy result.[1] Not knowing, at a deeper level, how these factors act on policy making, frame and even limit interpretation and perceived potential for action can greatly hinder constructive policy making. Potentially resulting inappropriate policies can then lead to the escalation of conflicts and further limit options for action and for building peaceful relations.

The analysis of this article rests on the results of qualitative content analysis and interviews. The theoretical framework is social constructivism with a critical element. The article is structured as follows: Counterterrorism measures and the impact of a national reference frame and of culture are elaborated on in a general sense. The theoretical and methodological frameworks are laid out. Then the focus is placed on the approach and particular national reference frame of the United States. The implications of the American approach with both the learning of the past years and the constraints provided by the national reference frame are assessed. Finally, opportunities for increasing both effectiveness and peace potential in future action are shown.

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Counterterrorism Measures and the National Reference Frame

The measures to deal with or fight international terrorism have evolved since 9/11. This is due to a number of factors. For one, thinking more in depth about the phenomenon of international terrorism and being forced to deal with it more have led to a greater understanding of involved dynamics, actors and motivations. The engagements in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places has also contributed to a better understanding. Increased contact with locals has illuminated culturally-specific factors and relevant conditions on the ground.

These measures build on one another as well. On the one side, the new structures and institutions, the great resources invested and personnel employed and the gained knowledge constitute the evolution of counterterrorism measures. On the other side, these investments can take on a life of their own. As additional resources are channeled into new institutions, new jobs created and linkages built, there are interests being vested. A large establishment is tasked with securing a country. The personnel, resources, institutions and agencies and their linkages all keep this machinery rolling, continually building on one another and thereby also expanding. One might thus warn against the developments of dynamics that take counterterrorism measures beyond the justifiable.

Western states face an innovative and global adversary, which is not easily discerned. The motivating ideology has a great impact. It is therefore important to understand the dynamics of radicalization of these actors (Ranstorp and Herd 2007, 3, 6-7). Counterterrorism efforts have to include an appropriate ideological response that aims to reduce terrorist support (Gunaratna 2007, 21).

Countries have had different experiences with terrorism, contributing to their view of it also being different. While for Western European countries, it was mostly a domestic issue (Rees 2006, 56–57), the U.S. experienced terrorism mostly as an external threat and therefore has its distinct view.

In this article I argue that a strong influence on policy making is the national reference frame of a state. In the interpretation of political developments, of other actors and threats, the national reference frame acts to shape thinking. Not only interpretation is shaped by the national reference frame, but also policy formulation.

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Factors that make up such a national reference system are many and diverse, among them being national identity, the national self-view and perceived role of one's state in the world as well as political culture. But also the views held about others are included, as self-view and the views about others are formed in interaction. National myths and historical experiences are also part of this frame. Even interests, insofar as they have become politically institutionalized, can be a part. These factors interact, being mutually constitutive. Together they act as a frame in which perception processes, interpretation and policy making are (seen as) possible. They enable certain views and actions, while limiting, disabling or preventing others. In essence, the national reference frame is a state's psychological foundation.

A national frame of reference can also be expanded to allow for the inclusion of other or new views. However, such changes likely take place in the longer term. For change to occur, some sort of impetus is needed—perhaps a crisis that forces new interpretations onto policy makers or other strong pressures. Mostly, however, a state's national reference system will maintain its core elements and arguments, as these build on one another and are thereby continually confirmed.

Cultural Impact on Counterterrorism Measures

The counterterrorism measures are influenced and shaped by the national frame of reference of a country. To further explain this influence, a brief elaboration of the impact of culture, socialization and perception is helpful.

In our perception and interpretation of the world we are influenced by our culture, and this often in an unconscious manner. Culture acts as a strong force upon a group and its members. It is a way of seeing, thinking about and relating to the world around, including other humans. It concerns the behavior of humans, their values and beliefs and how they arrive at them.

Clyde Kluckhohn defined culture as:

> Patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (1951, 86).

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More currently, Glen Fisher offers his definition of culture as structure, knowledge and coping skills system, all of it socially created, tested and transmitted. It is learned and shared (1997, 44).

During the process of human socialization, humans learn ideas about the world and about others. This is done via language, phrases and undertones in the speech heard in one's environment, including mass media. Also school books with their portrayals of history and other individual factors, such as education, social status, gender and political position shape our ideas about others (Flohr 1991, 78–84, 87, 90–99) and about ourselves.

It is what humans learn as familiar that allows them to differentiate things that are external and different. Individuals become group members and share the view of what is familiar and internal and of what is different. Shared aspects are further invested in and strengthened (Volkan 1994, 38, 41).

Culture's strong impact is also due to values being learned so early on in a child's socialization that it is not possible to first cognitively deal with them. Interaction with others in one's group serves to integrate values and expectations in an individual, which then impact perception and interpretation. The individual becomes bound to the own group (Spillmann and Spillmann 1989, 16–17).

An important part in socialization is the forming of identity. "Identity is defined as an abiding sense of the self and of the relationship of the self to the world. It is a system of beliefs or a way of construing the world that makes life predictable rather than random." (Northrup 1989, 55) In groups, identity is shared to a degree. Even a national identity is enabled. While national identities encompass many people, certain values and beliefs are still shared.

Identity and perception patterns impact one another. Perception is defined as "the type of information processing…essential to all living beings as needed orientation guide in order to survive in their respective environment" (Spillmann and Spillmann, 4, translated by author). As humans form their identity in their own emotional and cognitive learning processes, they form distinct perception patterns, which are shared in groups (ibid, 12).

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People perceive and react mostly based on their views and images of a situation or of facts. In these processes emotions or a sense of purpose can also play a significant role (Fisher, 4, 5, 27). Perception is dependent on the interpretation of reality as reality (Ostermann and Nicklas 1976, 22).

Since among group members perception patterns are shared, they also see the world and reduce the world's complexity along similar lines. Cognitive systems of humans and patterns of perception and interpretation are relatively stable once formed. The reduction of complexity serves to meet basic physical and social needs. Simply put, we see what we expect to see (Fisher, 23–25).

But humans also construct national identities, and such dynamics then apply to states as well. Also national identity is biased (Kowert 1998, 109). A state's identity "is a subjective assessment of the defining characteristics of the state, one's affective attachment to the state, and legitimate policies that must be pursued by the state." Individuals construct the subjective identities for their own state and for other states (Rousseau, Miodownik and Lux Petrone 2001, 6).

The sense of nationality is formed early on and strengthened by later interaction. The own nation is emphasized and a view of other nations is learned. These national images impact interstate relations. National images include levels of friendliness or hostility and a certain power potential (Boulding 1996, 461–464), along with ideas of security or insecurity. Images, also those of nations, reduce complexity (Boulding 1956, 111–112).

In the perception of something, the way of presentation and context is important (Fisher, 29). Framing an issue in a certain manner impacts perception and interpretation, for example via connotations or undertones, by presenting a certain context or connecting an issue with certain metaphors or to past events.

Meaning is made via framing. Interpretations and definitions express a position towards or belief about something. They include an appeal and can be used to convince others and to build legitimacy. Effective framing employs vocabulary that resonates with the intended audience and that is part of its history. Framing of a situation can be used to promote a certain response. A situation is defined in a manner so that a certain response in the group's cultural memory fits, linking situation to response. As example, in the U.S. 9/11 was linked with Pearl Harbor and placed in a war frame, facilitating war as response (Brock et al. 2005, 82–83).

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Leaders also often use metaphors. Such metaphors are culture-specific, making sense to the listeners of that culture (Heisey 1997, 15). Metaphors shape views and call upon people to act (Schäffner 2002, 183). Also, national myths are important. They provide meaning by offering an identity, a shared vision and a course of action. They express and strengthen values (Kluver 1997, 55–58).

Framing can be done in more or less subtle ways, but it must not necessarily be conscious. Due to socialization, framing can also occur while being unaware of it, which explains the strength of a reference frame of an individual or of a nation in shaping views and action.

But it is important to distinguish framing from a national reference frame. Within the latter the former can take place. The manner of framing is influenced by the national reference frame. This reference frame is, however, more encompassing. It impacts how information is processed, shaping perception and interpretation of the world around, of events and other actors, all on a national level. It acts as a frame in which thinking and therefore action is possible.

Analysis

This section briefly lays out the theoretical framework and methodology applied. The analysis covers the period from 9/11 until today. This includes the first and second Bush administrations. While this period is limited to these two administrations as a particular presidency and political style, there are also factors that go well beyond. These factors, to be detailed later, are rooted deep within American culture and the international behavior of the U.S. Furthermore, certain policies received different weights from the first to the second term due to internal and external developments.

The theoretical framework is *social constructivism* of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann *with a critical view*. Social reality is produced—in different versions—via social interaction and different categorizations, which humans use to interpret and understand the world around (Berger und Luckmann 1967, 70, 85; Pörksen 2000, 24, 27; Ulbert 2005, 9–13; Ulbert 2003, 392). Humans are actors and their socialization shapes their reference frames on individual and group levels. In these processes, language is a significant factor in the interpretation and political legitimacy-building (Risse 2003, 101).

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The added critical element consists of the consideration of the role of the observer or the researcher. Viewing social reality as constructed also has epistemological consequences. The researcher is seen to also construct (Ulbert 2003, 392; Weller 2003/2004, 109, 113), which presents researchers with the dilemma of how to make valid interpretations and conclusions. Not only need possible own constructions be reflected upon and subjectivity of the research process acknowledged, also methodological tools must be used to limit these. Another possible solution can be seen in taking peace as a norm to strive for. Added is the view that certain interpretations and perceptions are restrictive and limit options for political action. From this follows that reinterpretations of views and policy can open paths for dialogue and more peaceful relations.

Furthermore, the theoretical approach used here assumes more than just a subjective reality construction, but rather an intersubjective one. The critical or reflective elements allow the researcher also to reflect on his or her own constructions. To still further enable objectivity, methodological tools are used, including the utilization of background information, triangulation, transparency of the research process, systematic steps and explicit rules, which allow the traceability of results.

As to the methodology, a qualitative content analysis of strategy documents and speeches, interviews and a literature review are integrated. The insights from the content analysis are completed with those from the interviews, held with a number of decision makers and experts in security policy in the U.S. from key institutions in security policy and counterterrorism.[2]

United States

The American response to terrorism and its continued efforts against it are heavily shaped by the application of hard-power tools. Feeling attacked on 9/11 contributed to a framing of the situation as one of war, which led to seeing war as response. Since then, however, debate on which tools might prove most effective has very much increased. This debate is also due to the learning of past years.

To the U.S., 9/11 was "an insult to American honor" (Howard 2002, 9) and perhaps facilitated a call for war and revenge. But calling it a war leads to a type of war psychosis, actions, demands and expectations (ibid, 9, 10). This move towards the war frame, of seeing terrorism as a new form of warfare has been starting in the mid-1990s already. The danger of terrorism was seen to be growing and this increase was met with greater action (Alexander 2006, 15, 16).

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On the one side, this war frame of reference shapes thinking and action. But the war frame also fits in the particular national reference frame of the U.S. The American identity—strongly influenced by the historical formation of America—favors individualism, optimism and problem-solving. This enables a view that America and Americans can defeat terrorism and even do so alone. A need for cooperation or for compromise with partners gains little traction in such a view, and if then not for the sake of cooperation but due to a realization that success is otherwise not possible.

Linked to the war framing of 9/11, George W. Bush approached the threat of terrorism in a black-white and almost theological manner. This aids mobilization, but neglects the complexity of the issues. Different threats and challenges are lumped together along with unfinished business in Iraq. It would be better to deal with the complexities (Brzezinski 2005, 16–17, 19) and to recognize the differences among actors (Kilcullen 2005, 601). Weaknesses in the American approach are also presented by ignoring how own actions impact the situation at hand and by overestimating the force of their own values and underestimating the force of extremist ideas (Ranstorp and Herd, 12–13).

On the one side, there is recognition by American policy makers that the world and indeed many issues have become more complex. On the other side, however, the optimism inherent in the American culture and political style could also lead to a view that the U.S. can still deal with complex issues even if there is not a deep understanding of them. The optimism and problem-solving orientation could act to limit an in-depth inquiry and instead favor an attitude of 'getting to the problem' right away. In addition, the oversimplification of issues and actors is likely to partly stem from the sense about the own nation, a nation that is so vast in size as well as powerful. Placing the own nation into the center of the world limits perceived needs to learn about other nations in a detailed and differentiated manner.

The analysis of strategy documents and the interviews show that today's threats are seen as global and stemming from distance places. Terrorism, along with weak or failed states, WMD in the hands of terrorists or dictators, terrorist safe havens and support and spreading regional conflicts, is seen as unable to be countered by traditional deterrence. The view that distance no longer provides security aids an expansive counterterrorism and defense policy.

The threat of international terrorism is called imminent and real. Further and more deadly terrorist attacks are said to occur as long as there are global terrorist groups. The likelihood of terrorists using WMD is also

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said to have increased, again aiding a more aggressive, forward policy. Such a perception of threats and their context is helped somewhat by the oversimplification of issues already mentioned and the optimistic belief that America can defeat the threats. The use of force to counter terrorist violence is also aided by the historical experience and the national myths of America. The U.S. has in the past responded with military might to external challenges and won with that approach. After the Cold War, to a great extent also a military competition, it was the only superpower left. This strengthened a view of military power being appropriate to deal with conflicts.

The national reference frame with its elements of oversimplification of issues and a certain tendency to use dichotomies shapes perception and interpretation of actors as well. Terrorists are thus seen not only as mobile and elusive. They are also described as ruthless, uncivilized, deceiving, murderous, evil and as enemies of freedom. Terrorists are said to not go by rules of war, attacking soft targets and preying on vulnerable governments and individuals and on ungoverned spaces. They aim for WMD for still deadlier attacks.

Language to describe or speak about the terrorist enemy includes the use of opposites to show how different the enemy is from the self. Furthermore, the terrorists are described in terms of their character traits and thus are to be discredited at a deeper level. The feeling of being under attack may create more fear, and emotional dimensions are used to justify counterterrorism measures.

Viewing the battle as not just one of arms but also one of ideas facilitates American efforts for democracy promotion. Such efforts are now part of the counterterrorism measures of the U.S.

In the efforts to fight the evil of terrorism, America is guided by its sense of mission to defend freedom for Americans and the world. Freedom, justice, peace and human dignity are understood as being true for all humans.

The felt obligation to fight that which is evil by America as a free nation acts as a strong motivator for American policy. It is combined with the optimism that such a fight can and must be won, along with the view that God is on America's side, a sense of mission and American exceptionalism.

Policy implications also come from the view that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were unprecedented in magnitude and direction. Seeing 9/11 as an

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act of war against the U.S., the civilized world and human freedom can partly explain the measures taken. 9/11 showed that America is vulnerable, something that did not fit the element of felt invincibility in the national reference frame. Thus, 9/11 is said to have led to a new era with the U.S. fighting a global war against terrorism with new tools.

When American policy makers see the price of indifference as catastrophic due to the fact that WMD can be involved in an attack, then the prevention and indeed pre-emption of terrorist acts gains importance of first order (even if prevention and pre-emption are not always clearly differentiated). Due to suicide attacks and new technology available, pre-emption has become a valid tool for some American policy makers. The question of how a terrorist who is bent on committing an attack with WMD is to be prevented is not satisfactorily answered, however, as military force cannot prevent or pre-empt all attempts.

The American approach is shaped by the factors such as the specific American historical experience, national identity, military and other power potential, its overpowering international position and perhaps even the role of religion in politics expressed in the sense of mission. Some of the measures against terrorism are quite detailed and specific, showing that there has been much thinking about it. Measures are extensive and cover many different institutions, actors and societal areas. Of course, also a great amount of resources has been invested in counterterrorism. A potential problem is that the institutions, actors and resources tasked with fighting terrorism may take on a life of their own—all being active and engaged in trying to foresee and prevent threats. Threats could become exaggerated to justify the spending of resources, while such an exaggeration of threats can take place in an unconscious or conscious manner. The particular national reference frame acts to increase such effects and strengthen the dynamics behind.

Implications

Below follows a brief assessment of the approach. The learning of the past years is illustrated as well as the constraints provided by the national reference frame. The potential for greater effectiveness and peace is pointed to.

The American approach is heavily shaped by the use of hard power and unilateral action. The view of the U.S. being endowed with a mission to lead the world and the stronger tendency for dichotomies in perception and interpretation act to limit attempts to seek cooperation for greater

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legitimacy. In addition, emotionally charged descriptions of opponents are frequently used. But these restrict understanding, interpretation and therefore policy potential. Along with it they have a long-term effect, not only on the opponents, but also on the own perception and behavior.

The ability to act alone is connected with the view of the U.S. having a mission and with a tendency for black-white thinking. These factors combine with a strong impact on the American approach. They favor and enable unilateral action without seeking consensus or cooperation. The view that the U.S. does not need consensus or cooperation in its international behavior lets the U.S. at times engage in missions that on the one side are beyond its own reach and that on the other side lead to more or less strong disagreement and counteraction. In addition, new conflicts can be created or existing ones escalated.

These effects ultimately reduce American effectiveness and influence. Describing the opponent or enemy in an emotionally charged manner may help mobilization of support within the U.S., but it also leads to the persistence of oversimplified views and issues. Not recognizing the differences and complexities of developments and actors, such as the differences among terrorist groups reduces the effectiveness of American counterterrorism measures.

Learning

Since 9/11 there also has been some learning. Yet, the reference frame shapes how much learning is possible. Overall, there has been a differentiation and deepening of the understanding of the threat of terrorism and terrorists. Terrorism is generally not seen as monolithic anymore. The view of terrorism not being monolithic shows a certain ability to see terrorism in a more nuanced manner and terrorist groups as different. A more differentiated view allows the conception and application of varied approaches to different groups. Linked is the idea of disaggregation, which expresses the cognitive, perceptive ability to increasingly differentiate groups and therefore enables different treatment of them.

While there is still a strong emotionalization of issues, there are also calls for approaching the threat of terrorism in a more level-headed and unemotional manner, especially by some policy experts and members of the military.

Among the learning is also that non-military or civil means are important and must be applied for effective counterterrorism. The emphasis on

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hard-power tools is thus beginning to be balanced somewhat by the application of soft-power tools. In the area of soft power, the European allies are seen as forerunners, from which the Americans can learn something.

Another lesson is the need to deal with the ideology of terrorists and extremists. The ideological messages of radicals have to be met with messages by moderates, in order to make terrorists illegitimate in the eyes of their host population, to limit further recruitment and to withdraw some of the motivations and support, which would ultimately weaken terrorists. This means that the elements of extremists' messages must be made transparent, along with the political motivations behind. In addition though, alternative messages are needed. The interpretations of issues offered by extremists and terrorists must be balanced with alternative, moderate interpretations.

Part of American counterterrorism measures is the continued engagement in Iraq. But the invasion of Iraq has created constraints for policy action. Also other motives were driving the decision to invade Iraq, while debate on it was lacking. Stabilizing the country now is a great and probably long-term challenge. Thus, in the future it is important to clearly lay out the strategic aims and motivations for actions and carefully consider the consequences. Furthermore, intelligence ought not to be politicized as it was done in the lead-up to the Iraq War so that effectiveness of measures is not hampered from the get-go.

The view that tools other than military ones are also needed to fight terrorism has been part of the learning. Civil tools must be multiplied so that terrorism can be fought more comprehensively. A continued and still increased debate over civil tools is important, as well as addressing some of the root causes that are exploited by terrorists.

Multiplying and expanding partnerships with allies as well as non-allies was also seen as important. The recognition that the U.S. cannot be effective in counterterrorism when acting alone has been growing. This recognition includes the view that the U.S. needs to compromise more with partners and that it can learn from them.

Finally, learning includes the greater need to understand the enemy. Such a seen need not only expresses the search for ways to defeat the enemy, but also a certain interest in the opponent or enemy. This interest can be seen as something positive, as it implies a willingness to cognitively deal with the other.

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National Reference Frame as Constraint

However, while there has been learning in the past few years in how to make counterterrorism more effective, there are also constraints that limit learning. The national reference frame of the U.S. is such a limitation. As stated, the national reference frame of a country is a strong force that shapes perception, interpretation and therefore also policy making.

While some of these constraints were already mentioned, a few of the strongest will be laid out in greater detail. For one, the tendency to use dichotomies and opposites, as in humanity and freedom versus terror and tyranny is typical for American political discourse and perhaps even more so in the area of foreign and defense policy. Such a tendency limits learning about the other and gaining a deeper understanding. Perception is simplified and narrowed, which then also restrict further options for action. An additional effect is a growing isolation from the groups that are seen as the enemy. Such isolation would hinder a rapprochement or dialogue. The created divisions are hard to overcome later.

The use of dichotomies also adds to the emotionalization of issues and actors. Emotionally charged descriptions serve to legitimize certain views, but the created fear has negative effects. The view of the other is limited, again constraining the view of possible action. Emotional language also stigmatizes the other, which again creates difficulties for later rapprochement.

The American ability to compromise and partnerships are limited by its drive and motivation for unilateral action and its sense of mission. Feeling motivated by a mission, perceiving an obligation from a higher power to lead and being able to act alone due to own power combine for a strong discouragement of any recognition to have to compromise with partners.

Continually repeating in policy-making circles and confronting the public with the statement that America is not yet safe has its own problems. For one it begs the questions of when the U.S. would be safe and who gets to decide when that is so, or more fundamentally, could it ever be safe. Linked to a desire to be safe is the feeling of invulnerability that existed until 9/11. Likely, there is a longing for its return. Overall though, the problem of a potentially constant state of fear is compounded by a potentially endless mobilization and military engagement.

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Effectiveness and Peace Potential

The learning opens some opportunities both for greater effectiveness of measures and for peace. The greater recognition of a need for a more differentiated view of issues and actors as well as the already existing grown understanding of them allows a differentiation in the approach of different terrorist groups. If the U.S. can actually begin to approach and work with some of them—for example, those that participate in terrorism out of a need to ensure a living, those that are forced to take part or those that act out of a drive to maintain their own independence—it can reduce motivations, some recruitment and therefore terrorism overall. Cooperation can occur by bringing some of the more legitimate grievances into a political, non-violent process.

The potential for peace is also increased by the view that the ideas and ideology motivating terrorism must also be dealt with. This is linked to the greater understanding of the enemy. The ideas and ideology are an important motivation for terrorist action, recruitment and support. Showing what these ideas are in detail and uncovering their motivations, which often simply aim at power and domination over own populations, can help to reduce their influence. Credibly showing that terrorists are often only interested in power and using their host populations instead of protecting and helping them as they claim can reduce overall support for such groups. Also alternative, moderate ideas are needed. These alternative ideas need to supplant the radical and violent ones for a long-term, de-escalatory effect.

Many facets of terrorism, such as the ideology of it, cannot be fought or countered with military means. Thus, the learning that civil means are much more needed for effectiveness and legitimacy of actions also provides potential for peace and de-escalation. Conflicts cannot be solved by military tools alone. The affected populations must be shown that the U.S. is not their enemy. A country usually needs to be rebuilt long-term so that the population has a means of surviving and to continue living. The perception that the foreign military powers are there to help is very important and this perception is strengthened by the use of civil means.

Within American policy circles, the view of needing partners to be effective has grown. More and stronger partnerships and compromises would limit unilateral action by the U.S. and give cooperative action more legitimacy. America could be more effective in the long term by acting with others. Doing so would allow it to maintain its own legitimacy and good standing and strengthen its partnerships and thereby impact. Wielding its

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great power in a more multilateral and consensus-based fashion would more effectively bring or strengthen peace.

Opportunities

Since 9/11, the U.S. has expanded its counterterrorism measures and gained a greater understanding of issues, threats and actors. American decision makers are increasingly recognizing that the U.S. needs others to deal with terrorism and that more civil tools must be applied for long-term results.

The learning that has taken place among American policy makers, despite the limits placed upon it by the national reference frame, also brings opportunities for future action. These opportunities are about learning from partners and finding the best elements of the different approaches. The goal is to become not only more effective in counterterrorism efforts but also to expand the peace-building potential of these efforts.

In cooperation and coordination among partners, more effective missions require a deeper awareness about existing differences. On the one side, there must be an awareness of divergent views and goals in shared missions. On the other side, there is a need for more and open dialogue about these differences. To find compromises for all sides and agree on a shared course of action is significant in more than one way. For one, effectiveness of action is increased. Another result is that an open debate provides a check on the specific elements of a particular mission as well as a chance to evaluate the potential for backfiring. The creation of new problems while trying to solve others must be avoided.

Partners can also learn from each other. The U.S. can learn from its partners how to approach the threat of terrorism in a more level-headed manner. Rational calculations are more useful than emotionalized language when assessing the threat. This would also be helpful in not unnecessarily increasing fear. Linked is a greater knowledge in terms of cultural, historical and political aspects of Islamic countries or other countries in general. A better understanding, awareness of and interest in global issues also enables more appropriate policy making.

There is also the idea that the counterterrorism machinery in the U.S. might have evolved more than needed and developed some kind of life of its own. American political institutions need to balance off any self-created impetus for threat exaggeration and over-engagement.

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Another area where the U.S. can learn is in the use of civil means for stabilization and conflict resolution. This concerns the types of civil means that are currently available and which ones might be most effective in which situation, but also their greater development and creation of new ones. The view that the ideas feeding terrorism can hardly be fought by military means is finding more followers on the American side, but the U.S. can learn much more here.

Also in the upholding of own values and pursuing policy in a transparent and credible manner, American policy makers have significantly to learn. Rhetoric of democracy, freedom, human dignity and the rule of law must also be mirrored in action if the U.S. wants to be taken serious and seen as legitimate. Doing so would increase American effectiveness again.

Other countries can learn from the U.S. that the need for consensus-seeking has to be balanced with the need for action. At times, only calling for dialogue will not solve the problem, especially with an actor that is unwilling to cooperate. This is not to say that military force must be used. But dialogue and measures of engagement must be more fruitfully balanced with more active and at times forceful measures. While the American overemphasis on military means is problematic, so is a call for dialogue without anything to back it up. The right mix is of course an art.

Different partners have different elements that are more effective in fighting terrorism. Learning from each other and combining these elements as best practices would make counterterrorism efforts more effective in both the short and long term. Achieving sustainable results is after all an essential goal, while the creation of new problems is to be avoided.

Increasing legitimacy of counterterrorism is important for effectiveness. The efforts have to be more transparent. Engagement and the principles that the U.S. and its partners champion must be more credible in the eyes of those that could become supporters of terrorism. Reducing the base on which terrorism stands can only come via credibility and legitimacy. Such engagement can sustainably minimize the support—material and ideological—that terrorist groups draw from.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the national reference frame of a country acts to strongly influence not only perception and interpretation of events and actors, but also the resulting policy. The American national reference frame served as an example in the analysis. Part of the paper was also the

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learning of American policy makers in the area of counterterrorism in the last few years. This learning is again influenced by the respective frame.

The national reference frame impacts thinking and policy, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle. Policy makers can and must become more aware of this influence. Especially when it takes the form of a limitation, awareness can help to widen the understanding and interpretation. Other, more appropriate policies or additional elements within a policy can be enabled again. The U.S. can also learn from its partners. The combination of elements and best practices of each can contribute to de-escalation, to increasing the peace potential of actions and to overall becoming more effective in counterterrorism.

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Endnotes

1 This article developed from a conference paper, where the American approach to counterterrorism was compared with the German one. The different national reference frames of both countries, as the analysis showed, can partly explain the different policies. A previous analysis of the American and German approach to and communication about current threats, especially terrorism, also found important differences (Reinke de Buitrago 2008).

2 Interviewees are kept anonymous. Interviews were held with individuals of Congress, Department of State, Department of Defense and think tanks.

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