
Networks of Threats: Interconnection, Interaction, Intermediation

Julien Theron

Sciences Po, julien.theron@sciencespo.fr

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Networks of Threats: Interconnection, Interaction, Intermediation

Abstract

The rapidly changing global security environment requires to constantly adapt our understanding of threats. The findings of this paper confirm that threats interact with each other on three levels. Security, conflict, war, and strategic studies converge to build a new qualitative theoretical framework for threat analysis. Shaping the global security environment, threats communicate on three levels. Firstly, the interconnection of agents with similar ideological and/or strategic motivations connects threats. Secondly, interaction exacerbates incidental threats through cooperation, competition, and convergence. Thirdly, intermediation occurs between antagonistic threats trying to achieve common intermediary objectives. These networks are driven by agents maximizing their impact and reveals the autonomization and socialization of threats. Tackling these networks requires a global approach and the mobilization of collective security.

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Introduction

The global security environment is becoming more complex and interdependent. Scholars, therefore, must develop new approaches to understand its dynamics.¹ The purpose of this article is to contribute to this effort. The article's focus is not on security agents themselves but on the communicating behavior of the threats they produce. Based on existing scientific knowledge, the article proposes a theoretical model that articulates networks of threats on three levels. Although threats are always produced by agents, they can interconnect (I) and operate with compatible (II) or even antagonistic threats (III). The proposed model does not explain the essence of all conflicts; however, it allows scholars to explore the understudied relations between the various threats that shape contemporary security environments. The model cannot predict threats, though it may support threat scenario-building with new perspectives.

Literature Review

The latest literature has established the existence of relations among threats. For instance, traditional security studies scholars found that network-based threats, even if they remain indistinct, are a way to surpass the agent's capacities.² For their part, critical security studies (CSS) scholars have developed analytical tools such as securitization and de-securitization, ontological (in)security, weaponization, and the "co-dependency of agency and context," all of which induce active relations among threats.³ Although traditional and critical security studies remain somewhat self-contained within their conceptual prisms, both schools of thought acknowledge these relations.

Scholars of conflict studies also investigate the relationships between terrorist threats, as well as between multiple threats carried out by the same agent in different conflicts, or between identity-based social threats and armed conflicts.⁴ Certain models even test the links between threats, such as social media propaganda and social unrest, to predict destabilization.⁵ In this respect, Giles argues that networking threats can undermine complex security environments in order to keep frictions below the threshold of reaction, "in reserve as a *casus belli*."⁶

Coincidentally, in war studies, concepts such as Hoffman's hybrid warfare and Galeotti's political warfare, as well as postulations of "new generation warfare," 'ambiguous warfare,' 'full-spectrum warfare' or

even ‘non-linear warfare’” have highlighted the intertwined nature of contemporary threats.⁷ Indeed, states and violent non-state actors (VNSA) bring threats above but also below the threshold of violence. The emergence of a population-centric, group vs group, social, and transnational type of conflict, described as 5th generation warfare, also strengthens the link between kinetic and “non-contact warfare.”⁸ The distinction between war and peace is now blurry, with threats interconnecting in what Hoffman calls “the messy middle.”⁹ Finally, in strategic studies as well, Freedman acknowledges that an articulation of “very different sorts of threats” structure security environments “from below” and “above,” in what Lonsdale calls a “challenge of complexity.”¹⁰

The diverse approaches of these schools of thought limit the general understanding of the interdependencies among threats because the study of security induces “different sets of issues and [...] different historical and philosophical contexts.”¹¹ As Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard explain, “the more complex a system becomes, the harder it is for anyone to understand it in its entirety. Tight coupling between a system’s parts and those of other systems allows for the rapid proliferation of interactions (and errors) throughout the system.”¹² Therefore, it seems essential to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to understand the mechanisms of relations among threats.

Theoretical approach

This article focuses on how communication among threats structure security environments. Before addressing the methodology, it seems necessary to start from a synthesized, cross-domain definition of the core concepts of threat and network.

A striking gap across the above disciplines is that there is no unified definition of threat that is common to them all. Baylis, Wirtz, and Gray define threats as strategic “problems.”¹³ Bailes describes them as “challenges” whose “full spectrum” shows “connections between the different dimensions.”¹⁴ Threats, therefore, are hostile phenomena that structure security environments through their interconnections. In contrast to Bailes, this article does not, however, distinguish between threats and risks according to the perception of the peril, but rather according to its potentiality.¹⁵ Risks are, therefore, understood as potential threats and threats as risks that have developed into active dangers.

The definition of networks of threats has also been approached more directly, in diverse ways. Matthew and McDonald also seek to address “network-based threat[s]” but confuse “an informal web—a dispersed, transnational network—of individual behaviors” (a network of agents) with “malevolent threat networks” (a network of threats).¹⁶ Several other scholars, in contrast, believe that threats form networks by “communicating.” The etymological polysemy of this verb corresponds to their three different approaches: Being in mutual relation, being in communion, and having in common.¹⁷

A first group of scientists asserts the ability of threats to interconnect. For instance, Kunreuther and Heal emphasize that various negative externalities (possibly considered as threats) design a dangerous pattern that requires the combination of security mechanisms.¹⁸ Keohane and Zeckhauser confirm the existence of a silo effect among threats. Studying acts of terrorism and citizens’ backlash against government security policies, they establish that these negative externalities interconnect.¹⁹ Clark and Mitchell explore further the notion of “*channels* of communication.”²⁰ This approach affirms the possibility of communication between the threats and, therefore, the idea of network, which is also established under group threat theory. Blumer, in this respect, even proposes an enhanced “symbolic interaction” where “common perspectives [...] emerge through participation in common communication channels.”²¹

A second group of scholars describes the ability of threats to interact more actively. Bier and Azaiez approach networks of threats through game theory. Rather than concentrating on mathematical models, they address agents’ behavior from a more open, multidimensional perspective.²² In this respect, Hausken, Bier, and Zhuang study the interaction of threats of different nature, such as terrorism, natural disasters, and other types of hazards.²³ Matthew and McDonald use an analogy from environmental security to understand how threats can form a network. They argue that by interconnecting, specific threats can compose a broader “network-based threat.”²⁴ Carmi recognizes the ability of compatible threats to interact, such as state-related strategies, VNSA local violence, vacuums in fragile states, and sectarian conflicts. He advances the idea of the relative autonomy of each of these threats from its agent.²⁵ Kenney similarly links terrorism, trafficking, and bad governance.²⁶

A third group of scientists pushes the concept of networks of threats even beyond. Benavoli, Ristic, Farina, Oxenham, and Chisci look for a way to improve threat assessments. Considering the uncertainty of threats because of the intent and capability of the agent, they establish an “evidential network” to better comprehend complex security environments.²⁷ In these environments, Singh, Tu, Allanach, Areta, Willett, and Pattipati describe threats as designing a “pattern of transactions.”²⁸ In the same vein, Blalock considers that threats induce action-reaction chains of reciprocal behaviors among rivals.²⁹ Various case studies confirm that even antagonistic agents can constitute networks by communicating tacitly (Ebner; Lee and Knott) or explicitly (Koch; Chermak, Freilich, and Simone).³⁰

This distribution outlines challenges, theses, and research questions according to three levels:

I. While bonding, agents interconnect the threats they produce. The related challenge is to differentiate clearly between agents and threats. Agents are individual or group actors trying to realize specific projects; threats are hostile phenomena produced by them. While no threat exists truly independently of an agent, agents are rarely (if ever) in full control of the threats they induce, deeply influenced by material variables as well as third-party agents. Agents emit and adjust threats but are unable to keep full control over them nor their agencies, inducing therefore a “consubstantiality of security and insecurity.”³¹ Thus, it is crucial to distinguish between the agent and the threat. Nevertheless, differentiating agents from threats does not imply independence. Threats are both inseparably linked to their agents and significantly autonomous from them. Accordingly, this article considers the thesis of the autonomy of threats and investigates the nature of the conductors that push agents to interconnect their threats (Research Question 1).

II. Compatible threats can actively interact. The inherent challenge here relates to how threats, which are a priori similar, can proceed to these interactions. The difference between the accumulation of threats and the communication among threats must therefore be addressed. A simple juxtaposition is different from joint operability. Essentially, the accumulation of threats is a necessary precondition for their communication. The two processes are therefore not in opposition. Moreover, agents exchange information with coterminous agents more or less directly and permanently. These exchanges may occur through

direct contact, social media, propaganda outlets, or even simply traditional media coverage of their actions. Threats massively socialize through today's global information and communication landscape. This socialization thesis, therefore, stems from the fact that any type of informational contact between agents, however loose and informal, is a potential interaction channel for threats. This study thus tries to understand the different mechanisms of these interactions (Research Question 2).

III. In a transactional pattern, threats can in theory communicate even if their agents are in opposition to each other. From this perspective, the challenge lies in recognizing that threats are not necessarily aligned with their agents and can even operate against their agents' declared projects. Due to the autonomy thesis, threats might proceed both in the presence or the absence of their agents' direct alignment. In addition, from the perspective of the socialization thesis, they operate their own communication processes. If it is an apparent paradox that opposite agents produce communicating threats, but they might actually need to reach common intermediary objectives to realize their own projects. Threats might therefore objectively intermeditate without the official alignment of their antagonistic agents. In this respect, Schelling emphasizes the need to consider explicit but also tacit types of cooperation.³² This paradox thesis could explain how declared enemies can constitute a common threat. This article examines consequently also how threats operate these intermediations (Research Question 3).

The three research questions above are interdependent and consequently require a shared methodology. Contextual-effects modeling in threat analysis was an option; however, this method concentrates only on one type of threat—the power threat—based on the political domination of an ethnic group on others.³³ The threat curve method offers insight into multi-threat systems but does not focus on communication processes.³⁴ Quantitative data mining and analysis could also be an option, but this method would require a probabilistic inductive approach.³⁵ Instead, this article uses Kapitan's abduction.³⁶ Using data from case studies representing very diverse security environments can indeed induce appropriate answers to the three research questions.³⁷ This qualitative method mobilizes a selection of cases from the past 100 years. Older cases may contain pertinent elements but are too dependent on their specific historical contexts, such as the international order, sociopolitical habitus, or the

status of technological developments at the time. This article does not seek to exhaustively consider all relevant examples; rather, it selects pertinent case studies that strengthen the understanding of how threats communicate at the three levels of networks.

First level: Interconnection

An analysis of security linkages necessarily starts by examining the ties between agents. Both ideology and strategy are in this regard potential conductors. Ideology may unite agents affiliated with the same system of ideas, whereas strategy may push agents toward a common agenda. These conductors are the foundations of two different interconnecting mechanisms.

Ideology

Ideology may appear to be the most natural conductor. There are many examples of ideology acting as a conductor, including Socialist internationalism, European nationalism, and pro-Iranian Shia alignment.³⁸ Ideology acted as a conductor, for instance, in 2006 in Sudan. The Alliance of Revolutionary Forces of West Sudan arose from the interconnection between the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Movement. A compatible belief in Darfuri irredentism led the two groups to unite against Khartoum.³⁹

Ideology can also connect distant groups belonging to very different security environments. For example, Salafi jihadi groups sharing a similar belief are active in various theaters around the world, including Mindanao in the southern Philippines, Dagestan in the northern Caucasus, and Cabo Delgado in southeastern Africa. A global, holistic, teleological, and eschatological ideology unites these groups. They simply adapt it to their particular security contexts, regularly capitalizing on preexisting conflicts.⁴⁰

These examples support the potential of ideology to act as a threat conductor. However, it is not necessarily true that closer ideological alignment leads to a greater attraction. A more nuanced understanding must consider the relevant context. For example, nationalist movements can interconnect with one another but are not always eager to. The nationalist *Četnici* and *Ustaši* movements that reappeared in Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s were actively antagonistic toward each other. Yet the movements were similarly constructed, being

combinations of ethnical and religious belonging with a partitive, glorifying historiography. Nationalist agents could however arguably be considered as essentially incompatible, based on a self-declared superiority.

However, despite the conflict of World War II, socialist internationalism managed to align the regimes of Jaruzelski in Poland and Honecker in German Democratic Republic (DDR) along the lines of Soviet orthodoxy, under the Warsaw Pact. However, even in this example, the agents' divergences can lead to a limitation of the conduction effect. Ideological competition between the USSR and the People's Republic of China provoked indeed the Sino-Vietnamese war, as well as the war between the so-called Democratic Kampuchea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. A shared ideological foundation can therefore lead agents to interconnect their threats, but it can also lead them to compete for ideological leadership.

As Walt noted at the end of the Cold War,

“the observed association probably exaggerates the true impact of ideology. In particular, the extent of ideological agreement between the superpowers and their allies is fairly limited, and the correlation between ideology and alignment may be partly spurious.”⁴¹

Thus, ideological interconnection is not automatic. Ideology may lead agents to interconnect but can also turn natural allies into enemies. It is a natural, but uncertain, conductor that is dependent on strategy.

Strategy

As Balzacq, Dombrowski, and Reich note, irrespective of the ideology, strategic cooperation aggregates the interests of middle and global powers, such as Syria and Russia or North Korea and China.⁴² These links are particularly important in troubled regions, as agents face (or perceive) existential threats. Edström and Westberg reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of Regional Security Complexes (RSCs).⁴³ Such cooperation led countries and VNSA from various backgrounds to take part in Operation Inherent Resolve, which targeted the Islamic State. Thus, whatever the ideology, strategy can push agents to interconnect their threats against a common enemy.

Exploring the behavior of VNSA, Christia considers that identifying common strategic objectives is critical to “(1) win[ning] the war and (2) maximiz[ing] the group’s share of postwar political control.” She confirms Walt’s earlier assessment, saying that “identity – be it racially, linguistically, religiously, or ideologically defined – appears to have no sustained causal role in the formation of alliances.”⁴⁴ Strategy is, therefore, a more efficient conductor than ideology.

In practice, the use of strategy as a conductor can even influence ideology. If a state allies with a VNSA that uses terrorist methods, the state will try to recontextualize those methods ideologically as resistance, rather than terrorism. For example, Iran is at the center of a VNSA network (with Hezbollah and Hashd al-Shaabi), forged around the concept of *al-muqawama*, which literally means “resistance”.⁴⁵ Socialist movements such as the Turkish Workers’ and Peasants’ Liberation Army (TİKKO) and the Kurdish People’s Defense Forces (HPG), armed branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), have significant ideological differences. They can also insist more on their convergences when interconnecting their threats against the Turkish forces.

Agents interconnect their threats through ideology or strategy, and constitute in this way the first-level network. This adjunction initiates the autonomization of threats, as, interconnected, they possibly can dissociate from the agents, and allows for more integrative levels of networking.

Second level: Interaction

The interconnection discussed in the previous section encourages threats to interact. Indeed, Bailes emphasizes the importance of their co-dependency in shaping security environments.⁴⁶ Several case studies confirm this phenomenon.

Contemporary global jihadism developed out, for example, of the convergence of characters (most notoriously, Abdallah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden, and Ayman al-Zawahiri). They interconnected by both ideology and strategy.⁴⁷ The threat posed by al-Qaida in its early years was context-specific, linked to the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It played however a central role in globalizing ultimately the jihadi threat, using the international network of *mujahideen*. As the threat originally produced by al-Qaida grew in notoriety between 2001

(9/11) and 2014 (emergence of the Islamic state), the group progressively lost its control over the broader movement. Many agents interconnected to the shared ideology/strategy. They inflated the threat but also emancipated it from its originating agent by producing their own parallel threats. Some focused on local theaters (Boko haram) or diverged on the strategy (Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn). Thus, the threat of jihadism diversified, being still produced by al-Qaida, but also by numerous other agents.

Threats can therefore dissociate from their agents when they interact in a new, broader threat. This confirms the autonomy thesis initiated by the first-level network. Moreover, the evolution of each specific threat shifts the direction of this broad threat. Specific threats driving together the broader threat induces therefore that interaction backs the socialization thesis. Kelshall considers the autonomy and socialization of broad threats through the lens of 5th generation warfare and the rise of a new kind of VNVA: violent transnational social movements (VTSM).⁴⁸ Specific threats often interact to induce a broad threat without any leadership. Research examining social control, reflexive control, and controlled chaos theories also confirms that threats socialize.⁴⁹ This phenomenon creates a second-level network of threats, animated by three types of interacting mechanisms.

Cooperation

According to the U.S. Senate, “white supremacists and other far-right-wing extremists are the most significant domestic terrorism threat facing the United States.”⁵⁰ The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2019 established (Sec.2.5) how specific threats interact through the socialization of their agents, but also create a broader autonomous threat. Within the broad threat of American far-right extremism, each movement is fairly independent. The Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazi groups, the Three Percenters, the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the Boogaloo Bois do not share the same ideology, nor do they share an integrated strategy. Further, unaffiliated far-right individual radicals have even more disparate motivations. Each group and potentially each individual of this galaxy represents a specific threat. The agents interconnect their threats through incidental ideologies and analogous strategies (first-level network). Their specific threats interact and contribute to the broader threat, even where each agent’s actions are only known by the others rather than agreed upon (second-level

network). This interaction stimulates each agent's specific threats and strengthens the broad threat.

The targets of specific threats can also differ from the target of the broad threat, further supporting the idea of the broad threat's autonomy. Indeed, Catalan, Flemish, and Padanian secessionisms are specific threats facing Spain, Belgium, and Italy, respectively. However, secessionist agents are not only in contact with one another (first-level network) but also actively cooperate (second-level network).⁵¹ This creates a broad threat against a different target: the European Union (EU). The specific threats in question do not target the EU, as the regional organization could manage crises in individual member states. However, the broad threat the induce by their interaction could lead to the Balkanization of the continent, and, eventually, the collapse of the EU's political architecture.

Competition

The examples of global jihadism and the US far right show that the attraction between the related agents comes from a more or less cohesive match of ideology and strategy. However, specific threats can interact not only when agents cooperate but also when they compete while inducing a common broad threat. Such divergences among close agents may occur because of ideological self-righteousness or an appetite for strategic leadership. Even if two actors compete, their threats can interact and take part in the same broad threat. This is another element supporting the autonomy thesis.

The fierce competition between al-Qaida and the Islamic State in the Sahel is a clear example of this. Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) are in strategic competition with each other. The very creation of JNIM resulted from al-Qaida's desire to prevent the Islamic State from expanding in the Sahel-Sahara region. Their specific threats, despite being turned toward each other (inter-jihadi fights), also interact by expanding the broad threat of Salafi jihadism in the region.⁵² The competition between the two agents does not reduce the threat level; rather, it both invigorates their specific threats and reinforces the broad threat.

Convergence

Regardless of whether agents cooperate or compete, they may eventually fuse into a single entity, converting their multiple threats into a single one. This convergence can occur through fusion, allegiance, or absorption, as evidenced by the VNSAs that operated in Syria during the 2010s. The agents may merge to achieve greater efficiency, as when Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Ahrar al-Cham fused to form Jabhat Tahrir Souriya. An agent in an inferior position may also pledge its allegiance to an agent in a superior position, as did Tanzim Hurras al-Din with al-Qaida and Ansar Beit al-Maqdis with the Islamic State. A stronger agent may finally support the integration of weaker agents into a particular structure, as occurred when Firqat al-Sultan Murad joined Jaish al-Watani al-Suri as a proxy of Turkish Armed Forces. All the agents mentioned above attempted to reverse the gradual fragmentation of VNSA in Syria that led from “one insurgency to many.”⁵³ Their specific threats interacted and turned into a single one.

When a broad threat has a unifying project, the specific threats composing it may progressively lose their specificity and merge. The same types of interaction can be identified in other conflict situations, in Pakistan (Deobandi groups), Northern Mali (Tuareg groups), Bosnia-Herzegovina (groups from Republika Srpska) or Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (groups in Kivu).

The different types of interaction correspond to threats that are linked by more or less aligned agents. They may cooperate or compete, but they share in a certain measure ideology and strategy. However, strictly oppositional threats can also partake in a common threat.

Third level: Intermediation

As Schelling explains, threats might interact explicitly but also tacitly, enabling antagonistic agents to collaborate more or less openly. Studying mobs, he underlines “a potent force not only in pure coordination but in the mixed situation that includes conflict.”⁵⁴ Thus, agents may be ideologically and strategically opposed but may contribute, nevertheless, to an overruling threat. The mechanism of this third-level network of threats underlines the role of an intermediating element.

Mechanism

Several case studies support the existence of overruling threats. For example, Israel and Saudi Arabia (KSA) have set aside their ideological and strategic differences to join forces against Iran. For Iran, this poses a clear overruling threat composed of two different enemies with potentially devastating consequences. Israel might, for instance, use KSA territory to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Another example of such a situation exists in Syria. Having conflicting objectives for their country's future, some post-Free Syrian Army Arab *katibas* and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fought. However, others united, in the framework of the Syrian Democratic Forces, to oppose the Islamic State. The same mechanism has also emerged between the Iranian Islamic Republic, which supports a Twelver Shia theological regime, and the Taliban, which believes the quite different Deobandi fundamentalism, as well as, to a certain degree, al-Qaida, supporter of global Salafi jihadism.⁵⁵ The agents' common enemy is the United States, major architect of their international security environments. All these specific threats intermediate to create an overruling threat, despite the ideological and strategic antagonisms of their agents.

The same mechanism can also apply to antagonistic broad threats, as in the intermediation between Salafi jihadism and European far-right against democratic states. The objective of these two broad threats is to topple democratic states and install alternative autocratic regimes. However, neither is separately powerful enough to achieve this. Thus, they unite to reach a temporary common objective: security instability. For both movements, indeed, the transition from the present situation (a stable order assured by a democratic state) to their goals (a new political order, either Salafi or nationalist autocracy) requires a transition through a shared intermediary state (the collapse of the security environment). This mechanism could also apply to movements with rival nationalist and religious projects, such as in Sudan (Al-Nimeiry and Al-Bashir regimes vs Al-Mahdi's Hizb al-Umma al-Qawmi and Al-Turabi's al-Jabhah al-Islamiyah al-Qawmiyah), in Pakistan (praetorian apparatus vs Deobandi Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi or Ahl-e Hadith Lashkar-e-Taiba) as well as in Myanmar (military junta vs Buddhist monks).

As illustrated by these examples, agents can simultaneously be enemies and ally to reach intermediary objectives. Their threats operate simultaneously with and against each other. The overruling threat

appears therefore as superior to the antagonistic specific threats, thanks to an intermediating element.

Intermediating Element

The Salafi jihadi-far right configuration discussed in the previous section illustrates the role of anti-democratic dogma as the junction point, or intermediating element, between the movements. Agents do not need to meet to establish such an element, nor do they have to formally agree to intermediate their threats. Given that such agents are officially enemies, this is often unlikely to occur. Rather, the intermediating element exists *de facto*.

A key characteristic of the intermediating element is that it is both the meeting point and the conflicting point between the agents.⁵⁶ For example, the Syrian regime repressed the democratic movement that it associated with terrorism, while using jihadism to radicalize the revolution.⁵⁷ The Islamic State grew on this situation of repressive chaos and also repressed democrats.⁵⁸ Both the Syrian regime and the Islamic State disqualified democratic movements by associating it to the other, then repressed it. In doing so, they intermediated their threats to expel all moderate forces and avoid the creation of a new, Western-backed security environment in the country.

A similar situation occurred in Iraq. Between 2004 and 2008, Salafi jihadi and Shia Sadrist movements fought to control the country. Their intermediating element was to expel the US, which was also seeking to create a new security environment in the country. Both radical movements viewed the US as potentially favoring the other side. The overruling threat finally succeeded in expelling the US. The next phase of violence occurred between their heirs, the Islamic State and Hashd al-Shaabi, from 2014 onwards.⁵⁹

The last example is the recurrent opposition between far-left and far-right threats, which also intermediate an overruling threat against democratic regimes. In Europe, violent left-wing movements view democracy as an economically liberal, bourgeois, and anti-Muslim system dominated by the reactionary right. Far-right violent groups see democracy as a loose and overly liberal system of governance contaminated by leftist social disorder and tolerance for Islamists. Both movements denigrate therefore a common enemy, liberal democracy, associating it with the opposing camp. Their intermediating element is

to tackle down representative democracy to install new political regimes according to their own views. This intermediation can be either tacit or even quite explicit, as, for instance, in the contexts of anti-austerity protests in Greece, Gilets Jaunes demonstrations in France, and anti-vax movements.

Conclusion

Based on existing knowledge, this article addressed the way threats shape security environments by communicating through networks. The model developed through the case studies offers theoretical insights and policy teachings. It also raises novel issues to be investigated.

Validity of the model

The case studies examined in this article included various agents (far left, far right, Sunni jihadism, Shia jihadism, secessionism) that evolve in different regional security environments (USA, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Balkans, Sahel, Middle East, Eastern Africa, South Asia). This investigation confirms the results of previous studies concerning the existence of an architecture of networks of threats organized into three levels. The choice of a qualitative inferential methodology produced the following results with respect to the three research questions.

- I. Agents do interconnect their threats, motivated more by strategy than ideology as conductors. Individuals and groups try to leverage the power of their specific threats and, in doing so, initiate the autonomization of the threats.
- II. Threats initiated by aligned agents interact through several mechanisms that confirm their autonomy. By socializing, they shape a broad threat.
- III. An intermediating element allows threats carried by antagonistic agents to paradoxically align. Threats reach momentarily for a common intermediary objective while producing an overruling threat against a common enemy.

The first level appears to be mandatory for the second and the third one to be implemented. In other words, interconnection is a prerequisite for interaction and intermediation to appear. This three-tiered structure designs a simple road map.

Figure 1. Networks of threats' road map

Network	First level	Second level	Third level
Agents	Aligned or antagonistic	Aligned	Antagonistic
Type of communication	Interconnection	Interaction	Intermediation
Communicating process	Liaising agents push for threats to mutually relate	Compatible threats establish communion	Transaction puts opposite threats in common
Mechanism	<p>Ideology (strategy-dependent conductor)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> Explains ↓ ↑ Conditions </p> <p>Strategy (inter-ideological conductor)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">→</p> <p>Cooperation (reinforcing parallelism)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">→</p> <p>Competition (benefiting from rivalry)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">→</p> <p>Convergence (strengthening junction)</p>	<p>Intermediating element</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> </p> <p>Tacit Explicit</p> <p>collaboration</p>

Source: Author.

Theoretical contributions

The model proposed in this article makes several contributions to security studies. Networks of threats reveal structuring abilities, induce leverage effects, produce risks, and expose a security scale. Primarily, by networking, threats appear to shape security environments by being both “*causes and patterns of crises.*”⁶⁰ Networks of threats can substantially amplify the causes of security crises. As threats design the patterns of security environments, networks logically increase their complexity. By interconnecting with each other, specific threats determine the environment’s general structure; by interacting and intermediating, broad and overruling threats create a threatening superstructure. In this respect, security environments can be understood as frames structured by networks of threats that apply to a given geographical area, institutional entity, or social group.

Moreover, the examined cases show that networking induces in agents a capacity to leverage that maximizes their negative externality in the security environment they evolve in. It is a well-known fact that, by collaborating, agents obtain a variety of material benefits, such as finances, intelligence gathering, rear bases, multiplied firepower, or territorial protection. Thanks to their networking threats, agents also achieve stronger propagandist narrative, reach new audiences, the ability to attack superior agents, the dilution of responsibility, political safety, or international support. Agents, therefore, always have an interest in letting their threats network with others at all levels.

However, networks of threats also come with risks for the agent themselves. At the lower level, agents might suffer from an “open door” policy that leads to the blurring of identities and capabilities being siphoned off; agents might also be infiltrated by undercover enemies. At higher levels, they might lose their leadership (interaction) or benefit enemies (intermediation). Even so, due to the leverage effect, networks of threats reinforce the risk for security environments. The multiplication of possibilities that results from the network diversifies the types and probability of hostile actions. This is especially the case at the first level, as specific threats are those of the most direct and imminent kind. The difficulty in identifying the threats’ agency at the second and third levels amplifies the risk. The second level assembles incidental specific threats, implementing a broad threat that surpasses the sum of its parts. Here, therefore, the risk is also indirect but structural. At the third level, as the network associates antagonistic threats, the risk impacts security environments more globally. The risk is, once again, also indirect, but this time it is global.

Finally, networks of threats deploy on multiple scales. At the first level, specific threats are more immediate, sharper, operating on a smaller security scale. This does not mean that the impact would not be significant (as 9/11 demonstrated), but that the threat can transform directly into hostile action. The second level integrates specific threats but also pertain to a more strategic security scale through the broad threat. As multiple strategies shape the overruling threat, the third level deploys, consequently, at a bigger security scale.

Figure 2. Networking outcomes

Network	First level	Second level	Third level
Level	Lower	Middle	Upper
Threat configuring security environments	Specific threat	Broad threat	Overruling threat
Leverage effect	Horizontal	Integrative	Composite
Risk incurred	“Open door”	Losing leadership	Advantaging competitors
Risk produced	Direct, imminent	Direct & indirect, structural	Direct & indirect, global
Security scale	Smaller	Medium	Bigger

Source: Author.

Policy contributions

Besides contributing to theory, this study can also support security policymaking. The three-tiered model is not a universal tool; however, it can decipher various complex security environments. Contemporary security environments are intricate and rapidly evolving. New tools must be able to adapt and allow a suitable threat assessment.

In this respect, the model suggests that it is fruitless to fight contemporary threats without understanding their mechanisms of communication. Misinterpreting networks of threats increases the possibility of drifting securitization processes. Addressing one threat separately might end up worsening the whole security environment.

Today, threats are uncertain in their very definition. They are also sometimes indistinct, and almost always intertwined. The model presented in this article might therefore add a new tool for practitioners who wish to better comprehend how security environments are designed. To this end, they might follow the model’s road map:

- 1) Draw the landscape of specific threats and their active or potential interconnections, as the first network level is necessary for the second and the third one to come into being.

- 2) Review the interacting dynamics among aligned agents through advanced intelligence gathering and analysis, and enhance the strategic understanding of the broad threat.
- 3) Evaluate the interests, capacities and opportunities of rival agents to intermediate, explicitly or tacitly, via an overruling threat.

It is important to note that threats change depending on agents' strategies and material conditions. The networks can therefore quickly transform. It is thus essential for analysts and policymakers to permanently reexamine the networks.

In this respect, the diverse cases studied in this article suggest contextual factors that have positive and negative impacts on networks. These factors can favor or limit the ability of threats to constitute networks. Therefore, they represent ways to evaluate and prevent the networks' effects on its security environment.

Figure 3. Networking Factors

Network	First level	Second level	Third level
Positive factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unstable security environments - Inability to tackle similar agents - Previous conflicts - Non-security-related networks (social, religious, political, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Common nemesis - Ability to silence discrepancies - Important media coverage - Political momentum - Common areas of operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existence of an intermediating element - Alignment of strategies - Mirroring argumentation - Sociopolitical and security intricacy - Favorable international context

Negative factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political awareness of security agencies - Anticipation of threats (intelligence, action, prevention) - Fighting separately specific threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contradictory interests of a powerful ally - Properly calibrated security strategy - Lack of internal/external support - Fighting simultaneously on the first and second levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying and publicizing the intermediation - Revealing the intermediation - Addressing the intermediating element - Fighting simultaneously on all the levels
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Source: Author.

From a policy perspective, the general lesson that can be drawn from this article is that threats almost always communicate, even if indirectly. This implies that security policies have to be global and consider the security environment in its entirety, paying attention not only to threats as a whole but also to the complexity of their agency. The paper also shows that security policies cannot avoid external cooperation, especially when addressing networks at the higher levels. Collective security, particularly on a regional basis, appears to be crucial in tackling networks of threats that expand beyond local or national borders.

Future research

Inevitably, this article has several limitations that require further research. Regarding the first level, motivations for interconnection might vary with certain ideologies. Self-sufficiency is part of some ideologies (socialist autonomism or irredentist localism, for instance). Although ideology is a relative conductor, it might play a substantial role in conditioning threats' interconnection. Furthermore, first-level networking might depend on relatively isolating strategies. Some agents might proceed intentionally as limitations to external linkages, such as indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation (Andaman, Brazil, New Guinea). Others might proceed as protective (North Korea, Khmer Rouge) or forced (Kachin Independence Organization, United Liberation Movement for West Papua) limitations to networks. Another interesting path is failing interconnection when an agent is ostracized (as, for instance, the Islamic State's position on Abubakar

Shekau's Boko Haram, and to a lesser extent on the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara). Finally, the very transition from interconnection to interaction and intermediation could also be the object of a separate study.

Concerning the second level, the interaction among threats evolves rapidly when the agents' capacities change. The evolution of democratic and jihadi irregular forces in Syria reveals that the power balance of these two competitive broad threats was quickly reversed. Another issue is the ambiguity or duplicity of the agents when their threats interact. They might disguise their will, making it difficult to assess the proper type of interaction. Lastly, broad threats established by a competitive interaction (second level) might also turn into an overruling threat (third level). Indeed, aligned agents can sever their ties in case of important strategic divergences (the split between the Irish independentist movements; the conflict between the governmental and opposition branches of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement; or the triangulation between the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, and the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda-Armed Forces of Cabinda). If aligned agents become antagonists, their network can continue to operate as an intermediation rather than an interaction. This phenomenon could also be explored further.

Regarding the third level, the main limitation is how to discern tacit intermediation. As overruling threats might operate without the agents being in visible collaboration, this phenomenon has to be assessed through analysis rather than factual proof. This requires an excellent knowledge of sometimes very different agents, which specialists rarely have. Contemporary security environments offer many opportunities for unexpected third-level networks of threats to occur anywhere (Chechen Kadyrovtsy in Aleppo, Islamic State in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syrian National Army in Nagorno Karabakh, or the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic).

Finally, on a more general perspective, threats are often considered *per se*, as stated by agents. The problem of threats depending on subjectivity should therefore be addressed. Sometimes in connection with this issue but also more largely, processes of threat assessment regularly fail to properly address a given security environment, with disastrous consequences. Indeed, to stay under the threshold of

reaction, hostile agents often fool their enemies by keeping their threats intentionally low while leveraging them through multiple networks.

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