Contemporary global terrorism and the meaning and practice of 'national security'

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/10/contemporary-global-terrorism-and-the-meaning-and-practice-of-%e2%80%98national-security/

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In this essay I will argue that the responses to contemporary global terrorism undertaken by the US and its allies were realist, state centric and preoccupied with maintaining their own interest – a strategy underpinned by old and discredited ways of pursuing security (Bellamy et al. 2008). Instead, I will suggest that a critical approach would have, and would be, more successful. Rather than focusing on the state as the central actor in international relations, critical international theory focuses on the individual, turning the narrow scoped 'national security' into a wider conception of 'human security' where the individual is central.

In much of the recent literature on the 'War on Terror' it would appear that academics tend to agree that the realist, militaristic policies of the US have ultimately failed, that there is evidence to show that there was more Islamic terrorism in 2008 than there was in the five years previous and that the 'moral crusades' have created more problems than they have solved (Bellamy et al. 2008). Many theorists are therefore turning to critical international theory where focus is on an individual level and on the need to understand the context of the plight of the extremist group in order to combat terrorism (Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, as this 'war on terror' is being waged on what is essentially, a tactic, it is not confined to state boundaries (Jackson, 2007). This threat is an altogether new kind, involving non-state actors in an increasingly globalised world where defence of security cannot be addressed through the deployment of troops. Thus, as critical theorists propose, security needs to be addressed in a wholly different way.

This essay will firstly address how 'security' and 'terrorism' can be defined, moving on to discuss why the US-led war on terror has been a failure, examining its policies, its realist world outlook and its relationship with its allies. Within this, I will look at why a critical perspective, centered round the individual would be useful and possibly more successful in dealing with contemporary global terrorism.

As a concept, 'security' appears to be a contested one. While most agree that it implies freedom from threats to acquired values (Williams, 2008), there is disagreement as to whether the main focus of security should be on an individual, national or international level (Baylis, 2008).

In recent history and during the Cold War, national security was prevalent in the international realm, yet in light of the 'War on Terror' security is starting to be seen differently. Focus on national security is and has been waning as the sovereign state begins to lose some of its pre-eminence (Hobden & Wyn-Jones, 2008). Many security analysts view the process of globalisation and it's associated 'risks' as being largely outside the control of nation states and that only the development of a global community can deal with this adequately (Baylis, 2008). However, realistically, this development is not all that simple, illustrated by the complex and diverse six main threats to global security that the UN has identified (UN report: A more secure world, 2004). These are economic and social threats including poverty and disease; inter-state conflict; internal conflict including civil war and genocide; nuclear and biological weaponry; terrorism and transnational organised crime, including the illegal drug trade and human trafficking. Of these identified threats, it is the first three which account for the vast majority of lives lost yet members of the UN accord them with different levels of priority. Hence, the mission of the UN to devise collective security policies faces great difficulty, if states fail to agree on what is most important (Williams, 2008). Therefore, it is possible to claim that the liberal notion of a 'natural harmony of interests' (Dunne, 2008) among states is flawed and that instead of focusing on state

centricity in the pursuit of security, the alternative, critical approach suggests a personal emancipation from the state and a need to re-conceptualise security from the national to the global (Baylis, 2008).

In general terms, terrorism can be defined as the use of violence against civilians by non-state actors to attain political goals. Common grievances that give rise to terrorism include poverty and limits to political freedom (Kydd & Walter, 2006). Terrorist groups tend to have common goals often including change to regime, to territory and to policy; attempts to socially control and maintain a desired status-quo (Kydd & Walter 2006). Terrorist tactics employed by extremist groups have in some cases, achieved their intentions and more often that not have created mass awareness of their cause through the ever increasing global reach of the 24 hour media.

Critical international theory suggests that in order to combat terrorism, conflict needs to be contextualised and historicised in order to understand the relationships between violent terrorist action and wider social movements; for example it is restricting to examine the Italian Red Brigades without analysing the left-wing movement of the 1960s and early 70s and the behaviour of the Italian state towards such groups (Gunning, 2007). It would seem necessary then, that when constructing security policy, attention should be focused on a more human level, by analysing why people join extremist groups and addressing those issues rather than engaging in militaristic policies that put more innocent lives at risk, burdening human beings with preventable suffering; (Devetak, 2005) a successful counter-terrorism strategy may be possible.

In the events of September 11, 2001 3,000 innocent lives were lost when civilian aircraft were hijacked by Al Qaeda, demolishing a symbol of the US economic way of life: the World Trade Centre. While this loss of life was devastating, when compared to the 2,000,000 people who died in civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Bellamy, 2008) and the 40,000 children who die every day as a cause of preventable illness and malnutrition (Unicef, 1990), the figure seems less significant. Therefore, it could be argued that the importance of 9/11 lies not in the loss of life but in the 'global dimension' of an attack on the hegemonic US, reflecting a threat to world order (Bellamy, 2008). The Bush administration held the view that what affects them, affects the whole world (Bellamy, 2008), an opinion shared by Kofi Annan who claimed in the immediate aftermath that the terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11 'aimed at one nation but wounded an entire world… an attack on all humanity' (Annan, 2001). However, it was observed by the UN Secretary General in 2004 that not one African leader counted terrorism as a major threat confronting their region (Bellamy, 2008), presumably considering other, previously mentioned security issues much higher.

It was also not the first attack of its kind. Whilst unprecedented in the US; terrorism had been used as a tactic by extremist groups in the Global South many times before. For example, hard-line Hindu activists bombed the Babri mosque in Uttar Pradesh, India in 1992, an attack that was followed by Muslim riots that killed a number of people similar to that of 9/11 (Hensman, 2001). Terrorist tactics have also commonly been employed by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in their aim to create a separate homeland for the Tamils known as the Tamil Eelam (State) in the North Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. According to Hensman (2001), the LTTE encourages women to become suicide bombers, premised on 'blind support for the supreme leader'. However, before judging the actions of these 'activist' groups, critical international theorists believe it essential to uncover why they believe them justifiable; i.e. for some of the many war-traumatised Tamil children to take revenge against the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan government.

This suggests that whilst 9/11 was a shock to the Global North; as stated earlier, its significance did not lie in either the act itself or the lives lost. It was significant because it struck at the heart of the American way of life, of their economic status and wealth. It violated widely held Western beliefs of how war should be fought (Bellamy, 2008) and has, through the subsequent War on Terror shown that wars cannot always be fought with raw muscle power (Saigol, 2002). Hence, critical international theorists claim that to address global terrorism, the stark inequalities and differences that face the world need to be addressed before progress in global security is achieved.

The political repercussions of 9/11 have led to an erosion of human rights, civil liberties and democratic values within the US and many other nations. There has been virtual suspension of the established norms for the settlement of international disputes through peaceful negotiation (Joseph & Sharma, 2002) as the US placed itself outside the

rules, norms and institutions of international society (Devetak, 2005). It would appear that when a country declares itself in a 'State of Emergency', democracy and liberal institutionalism weaken as the executive power of the state government grows. Hensman (2001) writes of the UN that it has been side-lined with regards to the War on Terror, the US and its allies preferring a state-led approach. Furthermore, Saigol (2002) describes UN action as "toothless", perhaps providing depth to the realist theory that states will act in self-interest and in matters of high security, national interest and power will prevail over international law.

Directly following 9/11 136 countries offered the US military assistance for the War on Terror (Pasicolan & Hwang, 2002), showing that, as stated by liberal institutionalist theory, states will cooperate when they feel that policy mostly reflects their interest. However, in 2003 many influential states, including Germany and France opposed the US-led war in Iraq. It was said by the then US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld that 'if one leads and the cause is right, over time others will follow' (Pasicolan & Hwang, 2002). Yet in reality, almost ten years on, the US is still engaged in a long protracted war and considering that the countries allies are dwindling, the cause may have been wrong from the start.

However, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, domestic terrorism laws were enacted in the name of 'national security' across many nations. Examples of laws in Germany, Italy, Japan and many other states include the funding of security and law enforcement agencies, increased air traffic security and the freezing of the assets of suspected terrorists (Pasicolan & Hwang, 2002). In the United Kingdom measures were taken outside established criminal law to allow internment without trial, restrictions on residence and movement, exclusion and banishment regarding undesirable 'aliens' and denial of entry to the country, or deportation from it (Bonner, 2007). However, due to the adoption of the Human Rights Act (HRA) through the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into UK law, executive measures are curtailed more than in previous years as judges have been seen to be taking a more activist role in challenging government policy. For example following the London 7 July bombings in 2005 Blair set out measures to amend the UK's counter terror law; resulting in the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 and replacing the detention scheme in the Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 which had been declared incompatible by the House of Lords with the HRA in December 2004 (Bonner, 2007).

In the US, 9/11 triggered a reinvigoration of American nationalism (Bhattacharyya, 2008), in the months immediately following the attacks. The Bush administration created the Department of Homeland Security and passed the Patriot Act in 2001 allowing the invasion of the privacy of citizens, as law enforcement agencies could then intercept calls and emails without warrant. This shows that in a 'State of Emergency' even the US Constitution, held so dear in the hearts of many Americans, can be side-lined with regards to Amendment IV. Joseph and Sharma (2002) describe 'national security' as a convenient peg on which to hang long term agendas of managing and controlling a population; demonstrated I believe in the US domestic response to terrorism. Furthermore, images portrayed in the media, of manacled detainees at Guantanamo Bay have provoked international outrage, but the horror they face is not primarily of a physical nature; it is the threat of confinement, without trial or access to legal representation (Meek, 2003). The existence of Guantanamo and reports of the torturous treatment that takes place portrays a further contradiction to the US constitution, showing that whilst the US believes its citizens have entrenched human rights, it does not show the same respect for others. Of internment without trial it was said by President Nyerere of Tanzania that 'you are imprisoning a man when he has not broken any written law… you are restricting his liberty and making him suffer… for what you think he intends to do, or is trying to do, or for what you believe he has done, few things are more dangerous to the freedom of a society than that' (Bonner, 2007). Evidently, there is a call for a new kind of security, where the focus surrounds the individual, and where nation states treat people equally, providing them with social security, human security and rights (Saigol, 2002).

The core commitment of Critical Terrorism Studies is to a broad conception of emancipation, understood as the realisation of greater human freedom and human potential, in social and individual well-being (Jackson, 2007). However, the problem surrounding enacting such policies and establishing a new set of arrangements that will better promote freedom, justice and equality across the globe (Devetak, 2007) is that cooperation between states is essential but difficult to achieve; as are global rather than international institutions, where states have equal status – an alternative to the current world order where the Global North exploits the Global South. Marxists and critical theorists would argue that it is due to capitalism that this inequality is so vivid; that the nature of capitalism leads

developed countries to accumulate wealth through dispossession of capital from peripheral or developing states (Linklater, 2005). The US, as the world's richest country and hegemonic power, should accept responsibility in this status through finding ways to share its wealth, resources and technology, assuring that access to 'global public goods' including health care, housing, food, water and sanitation is given priority in international relations. Only then, according to Petchesky (2001) will security encompass these aspects of well-being and the possibility of universal human security be achieved.

Some of the literature speaks of a 'third possibility' (Saigol, 2002); a new non-aligned movement for human rights and democracy, an alternative to the existing 'camps' of 'us', (the US and its allies) and 'them' (the extremist organisations carrying out acts of terrorism) (Hensman, 2001). The very attempt to split the world up into divided camps fuels conflict and deepens the belief that this is a war of culture, an East vs. West conflict, a war in apparent 'defence of democracy' (Bhattacharyya, 2008). Critical theorists suggest that response to terrorism should begin with engaging with extremism at a human level (Gunning, 2007); that in understanding the motivations behind such groups, new ways of preventing attacks on innocent civilians for political causes can be uncovered. The 'fundamental rethink' of the meaning and practice of national security is slowly occurring as the notion of human security as a viable alternative grows in possibility. However, the implementation of a global human security is difficult to achieve; unachievable it could be argued with the current world order. The US, while its militaristic policies and realist world outlook have failed in the War in Iraq; its army still stands on their soil, Guantanamo remains open and the Long War rages on. Furthermore, while the Global North remains engaged in these hostilities other important security challenges such as the promotion of human rights and environmental sustainability have been pushed aside (Bellamy, 2008).

The UN's 2006 and 2010 counter terrorism strategy outlines a basis for a common strategic and operational framework to fight terrorism; including addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and ensuring the respect of human rights (un.org/terrorism). However, implementation of UN policies relies on the cooperation of states, and as realists would suggest, states will only follow in their own interest. How to alter state views from a national security perspective, to that of a broader conception of human security which, according to critical theorists would be more beneficial to the globe remains difficult, but I would argue, well worth working towards. Terrorism has no location or boundaries, it does not reside in a geography of its own; its homeland is disillusionment and despair (Petchesky, 2001). The best weapon, according to Petchesky (2001) to eradicate terrorism from the soul lies in the solidarity of the international world; in respecting the rights of all people of this globe to live in harmony, reducing the ever-increasing gap between the North and South.

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Date written: March 2011