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Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency: Competing Approaches to Anti-Terrorism

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SCOTT ADAM, JUN 19 2012

In a recent White Paper, the Australian government defined terrorism as 'the use of violence by groups or individuals pursuing political objectives' which 'can deliberately target civilians or non-combatants, often seeking to inflict mass casualties' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010: 3). While Australia and its allies might have subtle differences in how they define the phenomenon that is terrorism, collectively the West has been engaged in a War on Terror (WoT) since the attacks in the United States (US) in 2001, with Afghanistan and Iraq, and more recently Pakistan, being the most visible theatres. This region has been declared the 'epicenter global jihad' as both the attacks in the US of 2001 and the attacks in Europe of 2004 and 2005 were linked to the region (Cassidy 2010: 38). That ¾ of all terrorist plots disrupted in the United Kingdom (UK) also originated in the region (Brown cited Boyle 2010: 333) highlight the region's undoubted relevance when addressing the threat of terrorism. What has been questioned in recent years is how to deal with it (Antal 2009: 47). Counterterrorism (CT) and Counterinsurgency (COIN) are the competing approaches.

This essay will critically compare these two approaches to the threat of terrorism in three areas; actors, grievances and legitimacy. In comparing CT and COIN in the area of actors, it will be argued that the approaches can be complementary, and can be used in conjunction of each other effectively. In the case of grievances, it will be argued that the approaches are counterproductive, as CT does not address, and can enhance, the motivations for terrorism. Finally, the essay will compare the approaches in regards to the issue of Western legitimacy, and argue again that the approaches are counterproductive as CT can undermine Western legitimacy and in fact encourage terrorism. This will allow the essay to conclude that overall CT and COIN approaches are counterproductive. However, before these comparisons can take place, this essay will briefly define the approaches of CT and COIN to the threat of terrorism.

Citing US military literature, Morris defines CT as 'actions taken directly against terrorist networks and indirectly to influence and render global and regional environments inhospitable to terrorist networks', whereas as COIN is 'a combination of offensive, defensive and stability operations' (2012: 122). Others phrase it differently. Cornish considers CT a 'kinetic' approach to terrorism (2009: 64) while Cassidy describes CT as a 'lethal and circumscribed effort' (2010: 42). COIN's approach is 'broader and more discretionary' (Bell 2011: 310). While COIN can incorporate CT tactics (Bell 2011: 310), it is considered a more political approach to the threat of terrorism (Cornish 2009: 71). Kilcullen takes this argument one step further, and considers COIN '100% political' (cited in Bell 2011: 313). CT's approach to the threat of terrorism is the use of force. COIN's is the use of the political tools of dialogue and persuasion. Both can be considered proactive, and differ from reactionary domestic anti-terrorism (Whittaker 2007: 293). The differing approaches can best be viewed through their approaches to actors, grievances and legitimacy.

CT focuses on a limited range of actors, that is, terrorists. COIN focuses on the wider population (Morris 2012: 127). In this sense, CT and COIN are complementary. CT seeks to deal with the threat of terrorism from the top down. A COIN approach works from the bottom up. There is no contradiction. In fact, a combined approach can enhance the ability to deal with the threat of terrorism. A terrorist organisation can 'manipulate' a localised conflict to pursue its own agenda (Boyle 2010: 344). These 'parasitic' groups do not necessarily share the same grievances or

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issues as the host population (Boyle 2010: 344). As COIN aims to protect the local population and isolate those actors committing violence, be it terrorism or otherwise (Cassidy 2010: 42), its ability to be effective in these situations is enhanced. A COIN approach enables the local population to be engaged. At the same time, terrorists can be isolated as they do not have the support of the wider population. This enables a CT approach to be enacted. One such CT approach is targeted killings.

Wilner argues that targeted killings can change terrorists' behaviour, leading to a decrease in attacks (2010: 314). Potential terrorists are also deterred from joining groups as targeted attacks can lead to being socially ostracised (Wilner 2010: 315). Admittedly, when terrorists aren't part of the local population this is less of an issue, nonetheless, targeted killings can 'relentlessly' target foreign terrorists (Boyle 2010: 344) and these attacks have successfully destroyed Al Qaida's (AQ) capabilities (Boyle 2010: 347). As the majority of terrorist incidents in Europe have received support from AQ (Kilcullen 2007: 649), this has negated the threat of terrorism. As AQ has been a declared a terrorist threat to Western interests (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010: 8), demonstrating the utility of this approach. Furthermore, this CT approach does not conflict with a COIN approach.

Cornish states that the local population as opposed to an enemy force should be the focus of any COIN approach (2009: 64). As the terrorists can differ from the local population in terms of nationality, religion and grievances, as Boyle has suggested (2010: 344), a combined CT/COIN approach to the threat of terrorism is not contradictory. CT can target the opportunistic 'foreign' terrorists, whereas COIN can engage the local population and deal with any grievances that fuel the conflict that allows the terrorists to operate. This is not to say that a combined CT/COIN approach would be problem free. A CT approach contains the risk of targeting the wrong people and causing collateral damage (Cassidy 2010: 38). This could lead to the terrorist threat garnering local support. Furthermore, both CT and COIN can be counterproductive as they both can, in turn, enhance the terrorist threat. This is due to the fact that CT and COIN can cause grievances among local populations. This is a source of terrorism.

Western CT efforts in part lead to insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan (Bell 2011: 309-10). While both conflicts resulted in the removal of 'brutal' regimes (Jackson et al 2011: 257), they increased the threat of terrorism. The attackers responsible the London attacks cited UK involvement in Iraq, necessary for COIN, as a motive for their attacks (Jackson et al 2011: 243). Furthermore, a COIN approach can also increase the threat of violence. During the Coalition presence in Iraq, only 1% of Iraqis supported terrorism yet more than 50% supported attacks on Coalition forces (Bell 2011: 315). While this in itself does not increase the threat of terrorism, it can fuel grievances that do, as witnessed in the London attacks. A CT approach increased grievances that led to a greater threat of terrorism. A COIN approach with a larger 'footprint' also increased grievances. The two approaches were counterproductive, and caused terrorism. This has resulted in a shift in the COIN approach.

While both CT and COIN focus on the elimination of terrorist threats, the COIN approach has been expanded. The COIN paradigm uses an 'alternative logic' and suggest that the threats are not purely anti Western, but are also enemies of the wider population (Bell 2011: 319). While there is no clear link between poverty and terrorism (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Breen Smyth 2011: 205), COIN focuses humanitarian and economic development which can alleviate poverty (Bell 2011: 321). The goal of COIN is state building (Boyle 2010: 345). CT, however, can undermine this.

CT is force based. Force based approaches to the threat of terrorism have negatively affected human rights, the rule of law, democratic accountability and social cohesion (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Breen Smyth 2011: 232). These are the basic foundations of the modern state. COIN attempts to foster these principles in failed or failing states, yet CT is undermining COIN's attempts. Zuliaka furthers this argument and states that CT is in fact encouraging the behaviour it is trying to prevent (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Breen Smyth 2011: 260). In terms of state building, CT and COIN are counterproductive.

CT can also impede a COIN approach to the threat of terrorism in a more practical sense. Certain aspects of CT can fuel local anger (Boyle 2010: 346). This adversely affects the local government in terms of support (Boyle 2010: 346). COIN seeks to strengthen the local government, yet CT inadvertently weakens it. The two approaches are not complementary. Indeed, a local government can improve its position by criticising, and preventing, the more

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domestically unpopular elements of CT (Boyle 2010: 351). This can cause friction between the local government and those involved with COIN, and this situation arose in Afghanistan with night raids (BBC 2012). This can affect the wider relationship making COIN difficult. The approaches are counterproductive. CT is unpopular amongst certain domestic populations and is counterproductive to COIN in dealing with the threat of terrorism. This is also evident in terms of legitimacy and threat of terrorism.

COIN is largely based on 'moral rectitude' (Cassidy 2010: 40). It is based on the notion that Western political values are right or correct. Legitimacy is the answer to terrorism, not lethality (Cassidy 2010: 43). CT affects this. Although it is disputed, targeted killings are prohibited under international law (Wilner 2010: 310). This raises questions over the righteousness of Western actions. Legality aside, at the very least when these attacks result in civilian deaths, any moral 'high ground' is lost (Boyle 2010: 349). Further difficulties arise when an ally in CT has questionable legitimacy in dealing with the threat of terrorism. Pakistan, a key ally in CT efforts has itself supported terrorism in pursuit of its national interest in terms of its relations with India (Cassidy 201: 42). This undermines COIN's efforts to foster legitimacy as a degree of hypocrisy is evident. Again, in attempting to deal with the threat of terrorism, the approaches are counterproductive. COIN is used to promote the appeal and legitimacy of Western ideals and values. CT challenges this as it is a more blunt response and can operate outside legal norms.

Dealing with the threat of terrorism is challenging. There is no definitive solution to its prevention. A CT response has its merits. It is effective in removing those who seek to practice terrorism. Unfortunately, it has drawbacks, too. It fails to address the grievances that motivate the threat of terrorism. It can target the wrong people. It also raises questions over the legitimacy of Western actions. These factors heighten the threat of terrorism. They also work against a COIN approach. COIN seeks to engage the wider population. It seeks to address the grievances of the local population that can motivate terrorism. It also seeks to present Western political values and ideals as beneficial for all and the key for development. COIN also relies on the legitimacy of its actions. CT challenges these notions, meaning a combined CT/COIN approach is not complementary. As such, in dealing with the threat of terrorism, CT and COIN are counterproductive.

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