

Counter-terrorism and major powers' interaction in international relations

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Terrorism has become one of the major sources of non-traditional security threats in today's world. Islamic extremist forces, in particular, inflicted huge damage to large tracts of the world, be it Europe or America, even China, or Iraq and other countries in the Middle East. Terrorist violence masterminded by these forces not only engineered humanitarian crises, but also created huge pressure on refugee transit and recipient countries, even evolving into destabilizing factors for these societies. How to cope with terrorism and the IS cries out for coordination among all major countries.

Counter-terrorism reflects new changes in international relations

For decades, the international system put in place following WWII has been largely effective in forestalling and regulating war behaviour among states, making wars a rare occasion and generally limited in duration and scope. This has started to change with 9/11 terrorist attacks and the two wars on terror the US launched. According to Middle East analysts in China, with the rise and expansion of Islamic extremist political forces, the Islamic fundamentalists rated as terrorists all set for themselves the objective of creating caliphates or replacing modern law with Sharia law. This presented a critical challenge to European countries and the US, which follow the Christian faith.

For centuries, migrations by Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia have disrupted the traditional social structure in Europe, making it all but impossible for Europe to digest what may be the third wave of the Islamic shock, the first two being in the 8th century when invading Arabs were repelled and the 15th century when Islamic forces from Ottoman Empire overran South-eastern Europe, leading to the partial Islamisation of Europe. With disproportionate growth in birth rates leading to decreasing Christian and non-monotheism populations, European countries have been less able to assimilate the Islamic influence. Conflict of religion and civilization intertwined with political and economic pursuits has surfaced.

The US not only got stuck in the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the war in Syria in the past year, it also suffered from multiple terrorist attacks to its homeland. The latest case was a shooting incident leading to 14 deaths at the hands of 3 attackers in California. President Obama himself wrote a speech and spoke to the nation in the White House, signalling that the terrorist threat has gotten to a new level. The threat is real and America must defeat it.

Some thus are predicting that this conflict triggered by extreme Islam will

degenerate into universal force and everlasting non-conventional warfare. Some in China warn that such danger is emerging in mixed civilization areas such as Europe, South and Central Asia. Others in other countries went so far as to claim that “The Third World War against extremist Islam has broken out.” Given the otherwise catastrophic consequences, combating these terrorist forces should be a common objective of all peace-loving forces in the world.

The IS has become a standard-bearer of extreme Islam. All major countries have come to an understanding of the dangers posed by IS and terrorism and the necessity of taking joint actions. The US assembled an international coalition against IS composed of 54 countries. Russia started air raids on IS targets in Syria on Sept 30th 2015, which was the first open military action taken by Russia outside its territory since its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Russia is also joining forces with the governments of Iran and Syria. Syria now is the only country in the Middle East on whom Russia has some influence. Turkey’s downing of a Russian jet has eliminated any hesitation Russia may have on bombing Syrian areas bordering on Northern Turkey. And finally there is the Islamic coalition assembled by Saudi Arabia.

What we are seeing in the fight against IS are three inter-connected layers in international relations. The first layer is the conflict within Syria, including players such as the Syrian government, opposition, Kurdish forces and IS; The second layer is the interaction among regional countries. For example, Saudi Arabia leads some countries in fighting IS, but is also competing with Iran for domination in the Muslim world. The latter is apparently on the upper hand in terms of regional security issues. The third layer is the interaction among US, Russia, and Europe, which has been confronted with the influx of refugees fleeing IS areas.

If we compare the fight against IS with that against Al Qaeda in 2001, a major change would be in the nature of relations among nations. In the latter case, international relations after 9/11 had been subordinate to the anti-terror alliance led by the US, which drew the line at counter-terrorism: “You were either with us or against us.” Whereas now, counter-terrorism is subordinate to existing international relations. Here we’ve got a complicated situation. A major difference would be that the US was more like a major participant, rather than a leader in international counter-terrorism.

As the US announced its pivot to Asia in 2010, with which it sought to shift its global strategic focus into the Asia-Pacific, it tried its best to stay out of the new round of turmoil in the Middle East. The US only provided 2 billion US dollars to NATO air attacks on Qaddafi government troops, and it for the first time did not ask for commanding position in the NATO action. The US was initially hesitant when Arab

Spring occurred before it decided to give limited support to the opposition when the latter was already taking over. And President Obama never wavered in his determination not to send ground troops to fight in the civil war in Syria. Although it would be impossible for the US to leave the Middle East completely, the US is apparently no longer anxious to be the leader in the Middle East. The shifting role of the US has led to profound changes in the international landscape on counter-terrorism, creating room for more countries to exert their role and influence and also making the anti-IS situation more complicated.

Russia came in to fill the geopolitical void left by the US in the Middle East. At the major power level, the new Middle East situation was mainly about the rivalry between the US and Russia, who both compete and cooperate with each other.

So the fight against IS has taken on a geopolitical dimension. The underlying issue is: Who will dominate the internal politics of Syria? Who will take over Syria following the cease-fire? Although the US agreed to resolve the civil war in Syria through negotiations, yet its objective remains to maintain air attacks and overthrow Bashar Al-Assad's rule through strengthening the opposition. Russia called for negotiations as soon as possible to maintain Bashar's position. At the regional level, the contest is between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries wanted their role in addressing the political issue in Syria. They are concerned about a possible US-Russia deal which may involve concessions or agreements against their will. Sectarian, ethnic and Kurdish issues were all involved in this geopolitical game.

According to a diplomat in Egypt, the IS is largely run by the Sunnis and is the product of Sunni-Shiite rivalry in the region. The defeat of IS would mean a defeat for the Sunnis in general, or the rise of the Shiites, which is far from desirable for Sunni countries. This is an important factor for the complexity and protracted nature of the IS issue. The Syrian question will be a key issue in the political and religious landscape in the Middle East and different political forces have different considerations. Therefore, the approach to IS is very much coloured by religious and political calculations.

The IS network is now global. Therefore, even technically, the fight against IS is no longer national or even regional. It is a global warfare with the involvement of almost all major countries. However, in terms of prospects, this war may well be long dragged out, as air attacks cannot resolve all issues. The US air attacks in Syria since September 2014 have wiped out some 20,000 IS fighters, yet 8,000 attacks later, there are still about 20,000 IS fighters in combat, which is a good indication of its viability.

Since its nuclear deal with the US, Iran has seen its influence in the Middle East

rising, with a strong momentum in its external relations unseen for the past 30 years. Iran's relations with the US have also reached a high point. At the same time, it formed strategic cooperation and security alliance with Russia on the questions of Iraq and Syria.

The prospects for IS

Would IS be able to exist for a long time? IS grew out of Al Qaeda, but is also an upgraded version of Al Qaeda. Different from previous terrorist groups, IS has 12 provinces and 16 ministries (the figure is still evolving). But what we need to recognize is that it is a type of ideology and a way to realize this ideology that Baghdadi is really calling for, and there can be much more carriers of this ideology than only IS. Baghdadi himself and IS may be killed and eliminated, yet this ideology may be carried on by other individuals and groups. Even if IS was defeated by US and Russian air raids, its believers will enter other groups or cross into other borders and may rise again when the conditions are right. Furthermore, there are quite a few people who sympathize with IS in Western countries. Take France for example, whose Muslim population accounts for more than 7% of the total. After the Paris terrorist attacks, a survey found that 25% of respondents showed sympathy with IS and 27% did not like the US.

Even a conservative calculation would put the Syrian opposition to 130,000, the normal estimate being 200,000. Among these, IS accounts for 40% and the Supporting Front 30%. The Syrian government troops number about 110,000. Far from being dissipated by two months of Russian air raids, the Syrian opposition has only shown signs of being strengthened. Extreme Islamist forces are always ready to go with the stronger force. If IS is wiped out, its members may well join other groups, such as al-Nusra Front. As things stand, there are hundreds of thousands of migrant armed fighters in Syria, and 100,000 in Iraq. Attacks against the IS would do little to affect these groups.

Moreover, the IS as a dispersed group cannot be eliminated through air attacks alone. Yet none of the major countries have any appetite for ground war. The fact of the matter is the bombings have created more problems than they have solved, as they tend to reignite age-old animosities between the Islamic and the Christian faiths. The West was labelled as anti-Islam and anti-human who kill the aged, women and children with advanced weapons. Therefore, the eventual resolution would only come through contest between ground forces.

China's role in international counter-terrorism

China is also a victim of terrorism. The terrorist violence in Xinjiang autonomous region has everything to do with international terrorism in terms of ideology. Indigenous

terrorists in China followed the lead of Islamic extremists and created multiple terrorist attacks in Xinjiang and somewhere else in other cities in China, such as in Beijing and Kunming. Their organizational links with IS can also be seen during the civil war in Syria, where fighters came from Xinjiang to fight for IS. Therefore, preventing and combating terrorist attacks aimed at hurting innocent civilians have become a primary objective for China in its effort to maintain domestic security and stability.

The IS and the incidents and catastrophe it created attracted much attention in China. More and more international relations scholars are studying what kind of role China should play in international counter-terrorism as the most pressing non-traditional security threat. And the following are some of their views:

First, the Eastern Turkestan movement in Xinjiang is part of international terrorism. China must prevent terrorist violence in Xinjiang and other parts of China and fend off IS infiltration into China and collusion between IS and Eastern Turkestan forces. Through its global recruitment, IS has infiltrated into Afghanistan and Pakistan, recruiting from 31 out of 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

Second, every nation shoulders the responsibility of preventing its citizens from joining the IS. So does China, especially when there are already at least several hundred Xinjiang Uyghur fighters within IS.

Third, China must protect the Belt and Road Initiative from being disrupted by IS expansion. The kidnapping and killing of Chinese citizen Fan Jinghui and the killing of 3 senior executives of China Railway Construction Corporation in Mali show that such threat is very much real.

Fourth, it may be an inevitable trend for China to combat terrorism beyond its borders. The security needs and interests of Chinese citizens must be safeguarded. China is going to adopt legislation soon to authorize external actions by public security personnel. Yet China will not send troops to fight terrorism on its own. Its preferred approach is to cooperate with local security apparatus to this end.

Fifth, some people believe that the Middle East is a touchstone for China's major power status, as is the case with all major powers before. Looking from this, China is not yet a major power and is far from being one in terms of capabilities compared with such major powers as the US and Russia. Yet more and more people would like China to undertake more international obligations. The conditions are not yet ripe for China to go beyond its borders for purposes of counter-terrorism. China's aircraft carrier is not fully capable of combat with a carrier group. China has no overseas military base. China's air force

cannot execute long-distance missions. And poor intelligence is probably the weakest link in China's participation in counter-terrorism. Furthermore, apart from Russia and Syria, no other party has raised request for China joining the military action.

Sixth, China's advantage lies in economic assistance. China can contribute positively to post-war reconstruction and humanitarian assistance. China may provide financial resources for rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by the terrorists. And if necessary, China may consider providing assistance to air attacks against IS. In any case, China should be a staunch supporter of counter-terrorism in the strategic sense. In fact, counter-terrorism is the most important area of cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

21st of January 2016