

The Tri-Border Area's Link To The War On Terror

JJ Haglund

Just how global is the Global War on Terror? For both IR theorists and US foreign policy makers, this question is a major concern. Never before in history has the United States taken such extensive action against a non-state enemy. Most of the current focus lies on the war in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, but recent activities of Islamic terrorists in the Tri-Border Area of South America shows just how far-reaching the War on Terror needs to be. This paper attempts to examine the implications of the War on Terror for international relations theory and US foreign policy while doing a case study of terrorist activities and counter-terrorist measures in the Tri-Border Area.

INTRODUCTION: THEORIES AND POLICIES ON TERRORISM

The War on Terror presents a unique challenge for both IR theorists and policy makers alike. Though terrorism has been around for a long time, the terrorist threat we see today on such a massive, global scale is a relatively new phenomenon. The events of 9/11 and President Bush's subsequent declaration of a War on Terror present a shift in thinking in the area of international relations theory. Little work had previously been done on examining terrorism as such a massive threat to national and global security. Therefore, it is important to understand the implications of terrorism in IR and how each theory addresses the issue. US policy on this matter is evolving, and one can see clear differences in foreign policy before and after 9/11. Even today, the debate continues among IR scholars and theorists about how to approach such a unique challenge.



Scholar William Tow wrote, "At first glance, the terrorist attacks [of 9/11] represent the most recent and perhaps the most glaring failure yet in international relations analysts' quest to 'get it right' in terms of anticipating and responding to sudden and cathartic events in world politics" (Tow, 2003). Before September 11, the Bush administration was operating within a realist framework. However, they failed to understand the scope of the terrorist threat as "realism...is a worldview ill-equipped to deal with the challenges to security in the 21st century, as it greatly underestimates the critical role played by non-state actors" (Klarevas, 2004), such as al-Qaeda. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice believed that, "state sponsors of terrorism had to be the primary targets of any counterterrorism policy" (Klarevas, 2004). This reflects the realist view that some blame for the failure of the US government to prevent the attacks of 9/11 and an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq.

By contrast, liberalism gives great value to the impact of non-state actors. Liberalism places emphasis on international cooperation, economic prosperity through globalization, and the importance of international institutions. For liberals, the course to victory in the war on terror looks very different. Former New York mayor, Rudy Giuliani said in *Foreign Affairs*, "The most effective means for achieving these goals [of victory] are building a stronger defense, developing a determined diplomacy, and expanding our economic and cultural influence," and making sure the international system works (Giuliani, 2007). It is this combination of tools that will, according to liberals, provide the means for victory in the War on Terror.

On the other hand, realism remains a very relevant theory despite the threat of non-state actor terrorists. Stephen Walt argues that realists like himself, Morgenthau and Kennan correctly predicted that the Vietnam War was a

“foolish diversion of American power,” that the Cold War ended because the Soviets could not “keep up with a far wealthier and more powerful United States,” the easy victory in the Gulf War, and the events of the “unnecessary and unwise” Iraq War (Walt, 2008). Walt argues that realism has an impressive track record as a guide to foreign policy, and still deserves its place in foreign policy making.

While the debate between realists and liberals continues, little progress is being made. What famous IR scholar Joseph Nye proposes is something he calls “liberal realism.” This new concept could prove to be very productive. Nye’s concept embraces realist views of power and security, but also acknowledges the important roles of soft power and the promotion of democracy. A liberal realist foreign policy, according to Nye, would entail three things. “First, it would start with an understanding of the strengths and limits of American power. Second, [it] would stress the importance of developing an integrated grand strategy that combines hard military power with soft ‘attractive power’ to create smart power of the sort that won the Cold War. Third...to advance the principle of ‘life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness’... [by maintaining] a strong international economy...and encouraging liberal democracy and human rights” (Nye, 2008). If the American government embraced such a philosophy, one that appeals to realists and liberals alike, much progress could be made in the formulation and implementation of a unified strategy. It could also prove highly successful in achieving victory in the War on Terror.

That is not to say that the US has not already made considerable progress with its policy towards terrorism. There has been a clear evolution in US foreign policy since 9/11. Before September 11, the Bush administration had a clear realist foreign policy, and for good reason, as Walt successfully defends. However, since 9/11 the US has adopted some aspects of other theories to be able to combat the threat of terrorism. The National Strategy For Combating Terrorism states, “We must fight terrorist networks, and all those who support their efforts to spread fear around the world, using every instrument of national power— diplomatic, economic, law enforcement, financial, information, intelligence, and military...the United States, with its unique ability to build partnerships and project power, will lead the fight against terrorist organizations of global reach” (State Dept, 2003). Key aspects of this strategy include attacking terrorist groups, eliminating safe-havens and forging alliances with states to eradicate terrorism at its roots.

This National Strategy shows how political thinking has changed post 9/11. By declaring the War on Terror,

the administration recognized that non-state actors do in fact play a crucial role in global politics and that global terrorism is a very real threat to our national security. Unfortunately, reality does not often mimic theory and policy in this case. The war to find Saddam Hussein’s imaginary WMDs distracted the US from focusing on fighting terrorists in Afghanistan and in other key parts of the world. If the US adopted Joseph Nye’s vision, the US could focus its attention, power and money where it is really needed to fight terrorism.

In The War on Terror, most of the World’s focus lies on the Middle East and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, another key component of this war is the elimination of terrorist safe havens. It is widely accepted that ideal regions for these safe-havens include areas with easy access across borders, sympathetic populations, ineffective governments and unusual topographic features. One such region is the Tri-Border Area (TBA) in South America where Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina share a border. This lush jungle area has long been known as a haven for smugglers, drug dealers, arms traffickers and corrupt officials, and has recently gained international notoriety as a haven for terrorists. It is believed that terrorist organizations, like Hezbollah, and possibly even al-Qaeda, are operating in the region for fund-raising, training and recruiting. The presence of Islamic terrorists in the TBA shows just how global the War on Terror will be. While it is not the center of focus of the war, the Tri-Border Area is receiving notable, albeit not enough, attention from US counterterrorist efforts. While the United States is attempting to improve diplomatic relations with these three countries, it is facing serious setbacks in its counterterrorist efforts.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRI-BORDER AREA

The Tri-Border Area of South America is geographically defined by three large, closely grouped cities: Paraguay’s Ciudad del Este, Brazil’s Foz do Iguacu, and Argentina’s Puerto Iguazu. The region is known for its porous borders, drug and arms dealing, human trafficking, document forgery, money laundering and a variety of other illegal activities, The region is also contains high levels of government and police corruption The Federal Research Division of the Library of

THE TRI-BORDER AREA:
On the left bank-Argentina
On the right bank-Brazil
In the background-Paraguay





Above: Map of the Tri-Border Area, showing the proximity of the 3 cities
 Below: Iguazu Falls- this photo illustrates the remoteness of the region which is advantageous to smugglers and terrorists alike



Congress asserted that “governmental, political, and diplomatic corruption in Paraguay and the TBA allows individuals associated with organized crime and terrorism to bribe judges, purchase entry visas and engage in any number of other criminal activities that might overlap with legitimate economic activities” (Hudson, 2003). The same report found that “The TBA [has] gained a reputation as a lawless jungle corner of three countries...dominated by the illegal activities of mafias and Islamic terrorist groups. [However], the large majority of the diverse population is reported to be peaceful and law-abiding” (Hudson, 2003).

Among this diverse, law-abiding populations is a large number of people of Middle Eastern descent who practice Islam. All three cities are home to a flourishing Arab population mostly of Palestinian and Lebanese descent. There is reportedly a population of 20,000-30,000 Arabs, most of whom live in gated condominium communities in Foz do Iguazu and do business in Ciudad del Este. According to Foz do Iguazu’s Islamic Cultural Center, “Only one percent of Arab nationals residing in the TBA do not profess the Islamic religion” (Hudson, 2003). It is a tight-knit community with its own clubs, schools and mosques.

It is precisely for these cultural, socio-economic, political, and geographic factors that the Tri-Border Area has come to the attention of the international community. Joe Pappalardo, writing for the *National Defense Magazine*, believes that “this tri-border area is a haven for pirates, thieves, weapon smugglers and- most dangerous of all- Islamic extremists who are believed to be organizing and funding terrorist operations from the jungle” (Pappalardo, 2005). Porous borders and corrupt border official allow easy access in and out of the countries. The vast amount of unchecked, illegal activity in the region provides an easy way for terrorist groups to raise funds while maintaining anonymity. The large Arab population provides places to hide out, as well a sympathetic population from which to recruit. It truly is an ideal region for a terrorist “safe haven.”

ILLICIT ACTIVITY IN THE TBA

The Tri-Border Area of South America is a region that has historically provided a haven that is geographically, socially, economically and politically conducive for all kinds of illicit activity. CBS News (2006) called it the “Crossroads of Crime” and a “smuggler’s paradise” (Reagan, 2006). The area is often called a lawless corner of the jungle. This is in large part due to the corruption of government officials and law enforcement officers. Immigration officers and other government often accept bribes for looking the other way for smugglers and other criminals. The efforts of the security forces of these three governments are often hindered by corruption of their own police officers.

The Library of Congress also reported “the Argentine police have at least three reasons to lack motivation to fight crime. First, their primary duty is to maintain social order, not to investigate serious crime. Second, many police officers are frustrated by the slow-moving legal system and by expanding missions. The third factor is poor pay, which starts at about \$400USD per month. For these reasons, corruption is a serious problem at all levels of the Argentine police” (Hudson, 2003). Another reason is that whistle-blowers and witnesses often are threatened by other police officers to remain quiet. This is a serious problem not just for Argentine police, but also for the law enforcement officers of all three nations of the TBA. This widespread corruption makes this small geographic region highly conducive to a large variety if crimes, including drug and arms trafficking, producing and selling counterfeit goods and documents, money laundering and even terrorism.

CRIME’S CONNECTION TO TERRORISM

The link between organized crime and terrorist groups in the TBA is undeniable. The United States keenly aware of the connection and its potential threat. US Army Lieutenant Colonel Philip K. Abbott wrote, “The TBA offers terrorists potential financing; access to illegal weapons and advanced technologies; easy movement and concealment; and a sympathetic population from which to recruit and spread global



The Ponte da Amizade connects Brazil and Paraguay. Millions of dollars worth of contraband is smuggled across this bridge every day.



messages” (Abbott, 2004). On that same note, according to a statement made by Ambassador Francis Taylor, The US Department of State knows “that Hezbollah members in the Tri-Border engage in document forgery, money laundering, and contraband smuggling. We understand(s) that there may be reason for concern about involvement in weapons and drug trafficking. We fear that the money generated by these illegal business activities is being used to support acts of terrorism by the radical elements and terrorist subgroups of these larger organizations” (Taylor, 2001).

Terrorist groups engage in these illegal activities as an easy way to raise funds for their operations. The TBA also facilitates their ability to launder this money and send it back to the Middle East. Corrupt government officials and immigration officers in the TBA ease the purchase of false identification documents, including passports and visas that allow them to easily enter and exit these nations. An investigation by the National Directorate of Civil Aeronautics of Paraguay found that nearly 600 people enter the country using falsified documents and after paying bribes averaging \$5,000 USD (Hudson, 2003). The most well known case was that of Ahmad Assad Barakat, a leading Hezbollah operative in the TBA, who was able to enter Paraguay in 1989 using a falsified visa. However, this is simply one example, as hundreds like it occur every year. Therefore, in addition to the geographic elements previously discussed, the crime and corruption of the TBA greatly contribute to the terrorist presence in the region.

A TERRORIST SAFE HAVEN

Geographically speaking, the TBA is an ideal safe-haven for terrorists. The region is a remote jungle area and is close to international borders, and terrorists can easily and anonymously move in or out of any one of the countries sharing the TBA. The governments of the TBA, especially that of Paraguay, are corrupt and ineffective in preventing crime in the area. This makes the TBA an ideal location for the transfer of funds back to the Middle East. Economic conditions and laws in Paraguay allow anonymity on both ends of money

transfers and it is not illegal to finance terrorism in Paraguay. This makes it impossible to know from where and to whom the money is going, which is ideal for terrorist organizations. It is for all these reasons – geographic, socio-economic, and political- that the TBA has become such an ideal safe haven for Islamic terrorists.

KNOWN TERRORIST GROUPS AND TERRORIST ACTIVITY IN THE TRI-BORDER AREA

It is easy to see why the Tri-Border Area has become a safe-haven for terrorists, but the full extent of terrorist operations in the TBA is still unknown. Although the US government does know the general kinds of activities in which terrorists are engaged in the TBA, only a small number of specific instances have been reported. Ambassador Philip Wilcox testified before the International Relations Committee of the US House of Representatives that, “Hezbollah activities in the TBA have involved narcotics, smuggling and terrorism” (Abbott, 2004). These crimes are not limited to Hezbollah alone. A number of other terrorist groups are known to have operated in the region, including Hamas, Egypt’s Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group), Al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad), al-Muqawamah (the Resistance) and even al-Qaeda (Hudson, 2003). However, the majority of the activity involves Hezbollah and Hamas. Terrorism within the TBA has been limited to “selective, mafia-like assassinations of business or community leaders who may be opposing their interests” (Hudson, 2003). In addition to the groups participation in organized crime, these groups also use the TBA for plotting, fund-raising, money laundering and as a base of operations.

The most prominent terrorist organization in the region is Hezbollah. They have a number of known operatives that have been arrested in the TBA, and they have been involved in several attacks, both foiled and accomplished. Ciudad del Este served as the launch pad for the Hezbollah car-bombing attacks on the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires in 1994. While these attacks were devastating, local and US intelligence



The remains of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires after the 1992 bombing

have been successful in foiling other plots by terrorists in the region. In November 1996, intelligence agencies discovered that Islamic groups in the Tri-Border Area were plotting to bomb the U.S. Embassy that month in Paraguay. When police arrested Marwan , who was linked to a Hezbollah-affiliated group, he

revealed details of the plot. Upon raiding his Ciudad del Este apartment, police found large quantities of explosives, light and heavy arms, false Canadian and U.S. passports and a large amount of cash. He was later deported to Canada, where he received a nine-year prison sentence for drug trafficking (Hudson, 2002).

Some of the other alleged Hezbollah operatives in the TBA include Assad Barakat, Sobhi Fayad and Ali Mehri. Assad Barakat is believed to be the Hezbollah military chief in the TBA and is heavily involved in funding operation in the region. After 9/11, an international warrant was issued for his arrest. He is a suspected terrorist financier, but was arrested for the much smaller crime of tax evasion, since there is no Paraguayan law against the financing of terrorism. Another alleged Hezbollah operative is Ali Mehri. He was arrested in February 2000 and was charged with selling “millions of dollars of counterfeit software and funneling the proceeds to Hezbollah” (Hudson, 2003). When police raided his home in the TBA, they found videos and CDs that “contained images of terrorist propaganda of the extremist group Al-Muqawama which belongs to Hezbollah” (Hudson, 2003). However, thanks to large campaign contributions and corrupt government officials, he escaped from prison and fled to Syria. It is a common practice in the TBA for suspected terrorist groups to raise hundred of millions of dollars in illegal trade and then anonymously wire transfer the money to the Middle East and other countries. This has become a pressing concern for many government officials.

In addition to the huge amounts of cash transaction taking place in the TBA, terrorists also use the area as a base of operations and for plotting attacks. According to the US Department of State, “at one point, there were seven terrorist training camps in the tri-border region, and [has] no doubt the area is still a safe haven for terrorist” (Regan, 2006). William Pope, US State Department Deputy Coordinator of Counterterrorism claims, “several suspects in the 1997 attack

on tourist at the Luxor Temple in Egypt fled to the tri-border region, and that 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed is believed to have visited the tri-border area for several weeks in 1995.” Osama bin Laden also possibly visited the TBA for several weeks that same year (Pappalardo, 2005).

Furthermore, as previously discussed, terrorist groups organized and directed the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing, the 1994 Jewish Community Center bombing and the attempted US embassy bombing in 1996. The US government believes if TBA-based Hezbollah and al Qaeda operatives are plotting any anti-U.S. terrorist attacks, their most likely targets would be US embassies and consulates in South America” (Hudson, 2002). If this report is true, it means that terrorist activity in the TBA is a very real concern, and has enormous national security implications.

COUNTER-TERRORISM IN THE TBA

The United States has engaged in possibly its most monumental battle in declaring the Global War on Terror. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice said, “[The US] did not understand the full extent of terrorists operating in different parts of the world until we began to put together an international coalition to fight terrorism... [terrorists] will use any opportunity and any place to try and raise funds...that’s why the counterterrorism efforts have to be worldwide” (Gato, 2007). An important, yet often overlooked component of this war is the Tri-Border Area of South America. The region is economically, politically, and geographically an ideal safe haven for terrorists.

Countering terrorist activities, especially that of terrorist financing, in the Tri-Border Area has become a national security priority for the United States. Walt Purdy of Washington’s Terrorism Research Center stated, “If we don’t take enough aggressive measures to cut off that funding, maybe the funding and the manufacturing of counterfeit goods in South America will one day finance an attack on us” (Regan, 2006). The US has engaged in a number of counterterrorist actions in the TBA for this reason. The US has also held diplomatic meetings with the three nation of the TBA, now called the 3 + 1 Group on Tri-Border Area Security. The US also has attempted to have a small military presence in the region to aid in counterterrorist efforts, but has been limited in this regard.

On September 23, 2001, President Bush issued Executive Order 13224, blocking property and prohibiting transactions with persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism. This, in effect, targets individuals as well as institutions linked to global terrorism in any way. It also names specific individuals and groups like Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad. “The Order expands the Treasury Department’s power to target the support structure of terrorist organizations, freeze US assets and block the US transactions of terrorists and those that support them, and increases our

ability to block US assets of, and deny access to US markets to, foreign banks who refuse to cooperate with US authorities to identify and freeze terrorist assets abroad" (Prados, 2002). While this Order was directed to the entire globe, its jurisdiction is limited to American assets. Because of this, American attempts to freeze terrorist's assets are virtually ineffective in the TBA. Even when the governments of the region capture an alleged terrorist financier, he is usually only imprisoned for tax evasion because of ineffective laws. However, if the US were able to be successful in reducing terrorists' ability to effectively operate financially in the region, this would be a significant step in eliminating the terrorist safe-haven in the Tri-Border Area.

While this Executive Order is limited to American jurisdiction, UN Security Council Resolution 1373, established with the same aims in mind, has a much more broad range of influence and power. The Resolution states that "All States shall prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism...deny safe haven to those who finance, plan, support or commit terrorist acts" (Rubin, 2004). It also calls for states to make legislation making illegal the financing of terrorism. This is very significant to the TBA, as Paraguay currently has no such laws. However, regrettably, according to the *Military Review*, "a huge gap exists between a government's good intentions and its ability or political will to act. Most countries in Latin America support international counterterrorism efforts in open fora, but do little to control their porous borders, crack down on illegal arms shipments and illegal immigration, or tighten weak financial controls" (Abott, 2004).

This gap is a big problem in the TBA. The efforts of security forces in the region are severely limited by inadequate laws and by corruption of government officials. According to the *Country Reports on Terrorism*, "Paraguay did not exercise effective immigration or customs controls at its borders. Efforts to address illicit activity occurring in the Tri-Border Area were uneven due to a lack of resources and, more principally, corruption within customs, the police, and the judicial sector" (US State Dept, 2006). The US military is also involved in monitoring the area, but "are partially frozen out of the [TBA] because of US law that bans many military-to-military relationships with signers of a treaty establishing an international criminal court...Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay are all signers of the treaty" (Pappalardo, 2005). The US and the nations of the TBA attempt to cooperate in security matters, but are often hindered by these endemic problems of corruption and inadequate laws.

To address these problems further, in 2002 the United States joined Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in the 3 + 1 Group on Tri-Border Area Security, "To improve the capabilities of the three TBA states to address cross-border crime and thwart...potential terrorist fundraising activities" (US State Dept, 2006). In this regard, the US is using diplomacy as a weapon to combat terrorism in this region. The meetings of the 3+1 Group address the problems of the TBA by "prioritizing the effective implementation of border controls" and



In December 2002, delegates including (L-R) Ambassador Oscar Cabello Sarubbi of Paraguay, US Coordinator for Counterterrorism Cofer Black, US Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security Francis Taylor, Vice Foreign Minister for Argentina Martin Redrado, Ambassador Marcelo Huelgo of Argentina, and Ambassador Antonino Mena Goncalves of Brazil meet for the first Three Plus One Triborder Area Counterterrorism Meeting.

"intensifying the struggle against...the financing of terrorism" (Counterterrorism Office, 2003). The US is aiding these nations in complying with UN Resolution 1373 by providing training for judges, prosecutors, and police involved in cases involving terrorist financing, as well as training and advice for border control. The US is also aiding cooperation by promoting the efficient exchange of information between the four nations. On another note, with high-profile encouragement from the US, "Brazil inaugurated a new Regional Intelligence Center, in Foz do Iguaçu...dedicated to coordinating intelligence activities of the police forces of [the TBA countries]" (US State Dept, 2006). By addressing the ineffectiveness of these nations to combat crime and terrorism diplomatically, the US hopes to lessen the terrorist threat of the TBA.

CONCLUSION - THEORY VS. REALITY

Terrorism has become the great security threat of the 21st century. Unfortunately, few IR theorists have directly addressed the issue and the US lacks a comprehensive strategy for combating terrorism across the globe. The United States faces numerous challenges in fighting this war. In the case of the TBA, the US has encountered many difficulties with a lack of jurisdiction, inability to use military force, as well as inadequate laws and corruption of the host countries. It is obvious that something has to change in order for the US to be more successful in combating terrorism in this region and around the world.

There are, however, scholars that are skeptical of the ability of IR theories to address the terrorist threat. Scholar Jack Snyder wrote, "Theories of international relations claim to explain the way international politics works, but each of the currently prevailing theories falls well short of that goal. One of the principal contributions that international relations theory can make is ... providing the vocabulary and conceptual framework to ask hard questions of those who think that changing the world is easy" (Snyder, 2004).

Though the threat of terrorism is quite a daunting task, IR theory certainly can be applied to implement a foreign pol-

icy that will ultimately lead to success in fighting terrorism. The US has already made significant progress in this regard and there has been a noticeable shift in policy since 9/11. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has explained that, "The new Bush doctrine is an amalgam of pragmatic realism and Wilsonian liberal theory" (Snyder, 2004). The result is the same strong emphasis on defense and security, but with recognition of the security threat of global terrorist groups and a focus on the promotion of democracy. However, the Bush administration and the War on Terror remain highly controversial. According to Barry Buzan, the War on Terror prompts, "a vast range of questions...Pressing at the international level is of how foreign and security policies reach consensus...Bringing both levels successfully together requires a high degree of international consensus" (Buzan, 2003).

Possibly the most realistic way of achieving this consensus, Joseph Nye's proposed liberal realist foreign policy calls for an integrated grand strategy that combines both hard and soft power. While the US must use military force against threatening terrorists, military power is only a small part of the solution. According to Nye, "many official instruments of soft power—public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchange programs, development assistance, disaster relief, even military-to-military contacts are scattered throughout the government, with no overarching strategy or budget that even tries to integrate them with military power into a unified national security strategy" (Nye, 2008).

In order for such a strategy to be successful, the US must cooperate with governments and international institutions, like the UN, to address challenges similar to the ones seen in the Tri-Border Area. Although the US has engaged in projects similar to what Nye is suggesting there has been only limited success, as can be seen in the TBA. In order to be completely successful in the War on Terror the US must develop and implement a unified national security strategy that encompasses *all* areas of American power.

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