REVISITING THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION OF THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

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Abstract: This article revisits the Global War on Terror (GWOT) two decades after its declaration, critically assessing its strategic achievements and failures. It examines the evolution of terrorism as a threat and the shifting focus to state actors like Russia and China in a multipolar global order. We highlighted the limitations of militarised responses to terrorism, which have often resulted in regional instability, increased radicalisation, and diminished international trust. In addition, we described the strategic paradox of pursuing absolute security while neglecting socio-political root causes and explored how the GWOT shaped global military and political landscapes. Drawing on historical and strategic frameworks, the analysis reveals a mixed legacy of counter-terrorism efforts, suggesting the need for a balanced approach that integrates military action with diplomacy, economic development, and cultural understanding. The findings underscore the importance of reassessing global security

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strategies to address contemporary threats effectively in a fragmented and interdependent world.

Key words: Terrorism, hyperterrorism, strategy

Introduction

Global terrorism lost its predominance as the defining threat of an era that started soon after the Cold War ended. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's aggression on Ukraine in February 2022, along with China's rise as "an economic competitor and a systemic rival" (EEAS, 2022), state actors again dominate the threat assessment risk list.

As the US attempts to replace the Soviet Union as the focus of its foreign and military policy, Barry Buzan's assessment that Washington experienced "a threat deficit" may seem plausible for what happened in the 2000s (Buzan, 2006). While global terrorism, or terrorism with global reach, seems to be an episodic phenomenon in the interregnum between bipolar and multipolar (or new bipolar) world, exploring the meaning of the definition of war and factors that shape the success or failure of one's strategy remains relevant.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 8, 1989, inspired Francis Fukuyama to revive the Hegelian dream of "the end of history", but at that time, of the triumph of the market economy and liberal democracy. Twelve years later, the world was still far away from that dream. At first glance, neither terrorist-waged war in a traditional sense of armed conflict nor the war against terrorism could fit into a typical military operation. But the global war on terror, including the Iraq war (that the USA started in March 2003) seemed to be the desperate attempt to eliminate obstacles that remained on the path towards that Hegelian dream.

The manuscript aims to reassess the Global War on Terror (GWOT) critically more than two decades after its inception, focusing on its strategic successes, failures, and implications. It

explores the Evolution of Terrorism by examining how global terrorism became a dominant threat post-Cold war and subsequently diminished with the re-emergence of state-centric threats like Russia and China. It then assesses its strategic outcomes by Investigating the effectiveness of the GWOT in dismantling terrorist networks, addressing root causes, and promoting global stability. The article then highlighted the shifting paradigms of military intervention by highlighting the limitations of militarised counter-terrorism strategies and the need for integrated approaches combining military, diplomatic, and socioeconomic tools. Finally, the article offers future directions by providing insights into developing more adaptable and cooperative strategies in an increasingly multipolar world.

The article employs a multidisciplinary approach combining:

- historical analysis (by tracing the evolution of terrorism and its treatment as a strategic threat from the 1990s through the GWOT era),
- case Studies (by examining pivotal events such as the 9/11 attacks, the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and subsequent counter-terrorism campaigns to evaluate their strategic outcomes),
- theoretical frameworks (by utilising concepts from strategic studies, such as Clausewitz's "absolute war" and the trinity model, to analyse the war on terror as both a military and ideological endeavour),
- critical review of policies (by assessing US policy documents, including the National Security Strategy and related doctrines, to understand their implementation and impact), and
- global implications (by contextualising the GWOT within broader geopolitical shifts and its unintended consequences, such as regional instability and increased radicalisation).

This combination of retrospective critique and forward-looking analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the GWOT's legacy

and its lessons for addressing contemporary global security challenges.

On Terrorism

"Terrorism is designed to change minds by destroying bodies; it is a form of costly signalling. Terrorists employ five primary strategies of costly signalling: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding. The main targets of persuasion are the enemy and the population that the terrorists hope to represent or control. Terrorists wish to signal that they have the strength and will to impose costs on those who oppose them, and that the enemy and moderate groups on the terrorists' side cannot be trusted and should not be supported" (Kydd and Walter, 2006).

In many ways, (global) terrorism was identified as the defining threat of the era of the approximately first fifteen years of the 21st century. Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, were one of those that attacked the values that unite the community for a common purpose. Attacking social cohesion and trust in government, but not the state apparatus itself (i.e. military), is one of the characteristics of global terrorism.

The 1930s marked the shift from the 19th-century imperial system to the emergence of the United States as the dominant global power, poised to lead the world of liberal democracies. While Nazism, fascism, and Japanese militarism tried to capitalise on the turmoil, Germany, Italy, and Japan were never genuine contenders for global leadership. Rather than seeking to establish a global order, the Axis powers aimed to disrupt it. In the 1990s, global terrorism was viewed as an outdated result of global anarchy, emerging after the division of the world into Western, Eastern, and Non-Aligned blocs came to an end. Once again, it arose during a transitional period between a unipolar and multipolar world, with far less economic, political, and military influence than the aspirants of the 1930s.

War on terror(ism)

The terrorist attack in the United States that took place on September 11, 2001, symbolically opened a period rarely equal in history. In response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President Bush declared war on global terrorism and announced that the war would only end with the eradication of this evil (Bush, 2001). The punishment of the instigators of the attacks and the rout of their Taliban accomplices at the end of a dazzling military campaign thus marked the beginning, and not the end, of the American response.

9/11 was the leading cause of the United States abandoning containment (see Kenan, 1947) as a strategy and deciding to wage a new world war, this time against international terrorism. The triumph of innovative battle design marked the first phase of the Iraq war, emphasising precise targeting and the interconnection of aerospace power, ground forces and high-speed communications. Nevertheless, the results of that war overall are more than mixed: Al-Qaeda has undoubtedly been weakened, but Iraq took years to pacify and retreating from Afghanistan (2020-2021) represents one policy failure. The success of Washington's effort is all the harder since the USA lost many of its supporters, including among loyal allies, and triggered waves of anti-sympathy against the West (FONDAPOL, 2024). In addition, the number of acts of Islamist terrorism has been on the rise steadily since the War in Iraq transitioned from armed conflict to insurgency.

The United States considered its intent to eradicate terrorism with global reach at the beginning of the 2000s mainly by force. In that sense, the global war on terror was conceived as a war in its "Clausewitzian" sense. That meant fully accepting the principle that they "could not avoid showing at once that the bloody solution of the crisis, the effort for the destruction of the enemy's force, is the firstborn son of War" (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 99).

Issues on declaring the war

War on drugs[1], war on cancer[2] (NCI, 2021), and War on obesity (O'Hara & Gregg, 2006) are just some of the examples where officially or, more often, colloquially, the word "war" has been used in the USA to describe an effort to eradicate a particular problem. In the face of external aggression (like war), 9/11 created a sense of vulnerability and innocence, requiring an immediate and proportionate military response. A multifaceted, long-term struggle ensued, involving judicial repression, intelligence, diplomacy, and military action. However, it seems evident that there will never be a single final victory in the war against terrorism, just as there will not be (or cannot be) a single victory in the War on crime or the War on drugs. The complex nature and evolving tactics of terrorism necessitate ongoing prevention efforts.

In its classic definition, from Cicero to Hobbes via Grotius, war is the state of those who seek to end a quarrel by force[3]. In this conception, war is a means, second concerning the dispute that provoked it. There are first litigants on trial who, at a given moment, leave the court to rely on the judgment of the weapons. In a state of war, there is always a cause, good or bad, and each pursues his right. This perspective has historically led terrorist groups to declare that they are at war with the legitimate authorities they oppose. For instance, members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang and the Red Brigades viewed themselves as fighters engaged in a people's war against the police states of Germany and Italy, respectively. In contrast, these states rejected such a characterisation and appropriately regarded these individuals as criminals.

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[1] Former US President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse "public enemy number one" at a press conference on June 17, 1971, with his newly appointed Drug Authority at his side. He continued, "To combat and defeat this enemy, we need a new, all-out offensive." Thus, the "war on drugs" began.

[2] On 23 December 1971, Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act, which began this effort, though it wasn't referred to as a "war" in the legislation.

[3] Cicero defined war as "a contention by force", for Hugo Grotius war is "the state of contending parties, considered as such", and Thomas Hobbes perceived the war as an attitude: "By war is meant a state of affairs, which may exist even while its operations are not continued" (Moseley, 2003).

By proclaiming that it was at war with terrorists (primarily Al-Qaeda), America gave Bin Laden and his accomplices their second victory. Bin Laden's followers were comforted in the idea that they had a quarrel with America and their status as warriors. In fact, in Al-Qaeda, there was only pure hate, disconnected from any plausible political objective, which made them criminal lunatics. The American experience of war has been at odds with the historical European conception of "duel warfare". America's major wars were total wars against adversaries whom it treated as criminals and pursued until their total capitulation[4]. It was mainly during WW2 that American leaders saw a war without the spirit of gallantry, where the adversary was morally condemned as much as it was fought.

The notion that September 11, 2001, constituted an act of war reflects the ongoing American experience of total warfare aimed at achieving the complete defeat of the enemy. The aggressive approach taken in the fight against terrorism aligns with this American tradition, which embodies what Carl Schmitt[5] criticised in his time as the "criminalisation of war.". It remained that this choice gave Al-Qaeda, its supporters, and its epigones, rogue fighters of an imaginary war, a stature of warriors and that they would have engaged the first power in the world in the test of arms.

They could not have asked for more. Prisoners of War or illegal combatants? The first contradiction in which the United States found itself, as soon as it was at war, is legal. What status should be granted to members of Al Qaeda or other global terrorist networks who would be captured in this war? In this respect, the United States considered their enemy to be terrorism, or rather "terror", including all those who were affiliated with or were accomplices to global terrorist networks. This made it possible, in theory, to continue war operations against them beyond the

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[4] At the end of the Tunisia campaign, Dwight Eisenhower disapproved of British General Claude Auchinleck who shook hands with the commander of the German forces, General von Arnim.

[5] Carl Schmitt argued that a commitment to just war fosters the criminalisation and demonisation of the enemy

conclusion of the Afghanistan campaign and the theatre of operations. Examples of that are the execution of one of Bin Laden's lieutenants in November 2002 in Yemen by a missile fired from a Predator drone and the execution of Osama Bin Laden himself in Pakistan in May 2011 by the United States Navy SEALs.

It can be argued that the use of the term "war" to describe the fight against terrorism was a natural response to the severity of the attack and the deep-seated hatred it revealed towards America. Consequently, this terminology was not inappropriate when referring to the campaign in Afghanistan. The events of September 11, 2001, revealed the harsh reality of mass terrorism, showcasing a level of destruction that had previously been thought to be the exclusive domain of nation-states. In the immediate aftermath, both the Security Council and the North Atlantic Council recognised that an armed attack had occurred. They acknowledged the United States' right to self-defence against the states that may have sponsored or supported the attack. Nevertheless, labelling it as "war" elevates the adversary and grants legitimacy they do not warrant (Andréani, 2004).

However, it soon became apparent that the reality of the "war" would go far beyond the punishment of state accomplices enjoyed by the 9/11 attackers. Soon, it was clear that Afghanistan was only a "step 1" that others would follow. The war settled in the political narrative, strategy, and legal concepts the United States carried out during this global fight against international terrorism. As a campaign, the War against Terrorism demonstrated the resolve of the United States and its level of mobilisation, rallying friends and discouraging those who were hesitant. In the fight against terrorism, it allowed some of the cumbersomeness of international judicial cooperation and the American legal system to be overcome.

Global War on Terror – "our war"?

> *"The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilised world. And*

the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them."

- President George W. Bush, October 11 2001

The media reporting launched the 9/11 attacks into the stratosphere of public interests. The attacks were being followed directly by journalists and T.V. channels and aired in real-time. The level of publicity may be illustrated by the famous Marshall McLuhan's phrase "global village", first used in 1968 in the book entitled "Peace and War in the Global Village" (McLuhan, 1968). The world, therefore, by virtue of the media alone[6], was becoming a village where everyone knows everyone and everything that happens is known immediately. Media coverage also played an essential role in shaping the public image of the event. The most powerful country in the world, obsessed with the security of its citizens, with a US Intelligence Community's level of budget (ODNI, 2024) and capability hardly imaginable to the rest of the world, suddenly became "one of us", vulnerable and temporarily disorganised. "Los ricos también lloran" ("Rich people cry too"), a popular Mexican soap opera (telenovela), seems to be a good title for the event that united almost 4 billion people in shock. Psychologically, the USA found itself at war, attacked for no reason; it discovered its vulnerability and the intensity of the hostility to which it was subjected. "Why do they hate us?" said George Bush, echoing the disbelief of his fellow citizens (Bush, 2001).

The fervour of popular patriotism, the everywhere present flags, and the American war rhetoric bore witness to that. The moment had produced its excesses: the celebration of the "heroes" and the denunciation of the "cowardice" of the attacks, words which in reality meant innocent victims and fanatical and perhaps

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[6] 9/11 had not been, however, the first time that TV broadcasting had such an impact in the USA. The impact on public opinion of the first "television war", waged in Vietnam by the United States had also dramatic effects.

demented murderers, but indeed not cowards (see more at Weber, 2005). Terrorism succeeded in becoming a defining threat that occupied an important part of military thinking. Writing books and other studies on terrorism became virtually mandatory if one aspired to be a part of the fashionable and funded crowd (Gray, 2005).

Terrorism and war against terrorism – what was the success of the two strategies?

The 2002 US National Security Strategy identifies "fighting a war against terrorists of global reach" as the core objective of American military strategy at the time, defining terrorism itself as the principal enemy. While the term "war on terror" may lack precision—since declaring war on a tactic is inherently paradoxical—it effectively underscores the gravity with which terrorism is regarded, signifying its status as a critical issue demanding a robust and comprehensive response (Kertzer, 2007).

How successful was the strategy of global terrorism?

In 2001, Al-Qaeda's primary objective was to execute a significant attack on the United States to inflict substantial damage and loss of life while drawing attention to its cause and ideology. This culminated in the September 11 attacks, where four commercial airliners were hijacked, two of which were deliberately flown into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, resulting in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people. The attacks were designed to provoke a US military response, sparking a larger conflict between Western nations and the Muslim world. This broader conflict aimed to galvanise support for Al-Qaeda's extremist ideology among Muslims globally while eroding backing for Western powers. Al-Qaeda's overarching strategy at the time centred on waging a global jihad against the US and its allies, with the ultimate goal of establishing a global caliphate governed by its interpretation of Islamic law. The group viewed itself as engaged in a fundamental struggle between Islam and the West, which it framed as a

defence of Islam against perceived Western aggression and interference in Muslim-majority countries.

Numerous scholars studying terrorism argue that, at best, it can only achieve limited tactical successes and occasional sensational impacts. Still, it has never led to a revolutionary breakthrough in any context (see, for example, Abrahms, 2006; Gray, 2005). However, the March 2004 Madrid train bombings present an exclusion to this perspective. The terrorist group responsible for the attacks aimed at compelling the Spanish government to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, and they ultimately succeeded in this objective.

The success of terrorist organisations in achieving their goals depends on many circumstances, including, among others, the support they have in population, structure and organisation, financing, and strategy. Under certain conditions, terrorist organisations' strategies may work well, while under others, they may not. A state's response to one strategy could also be inappropriate for another strategy. Occasionally, terrorists combine strategies, which is also a reason for a well-coordinated response. Terrorism is generally treated as an unacceptable practice, never accepted by international law, since it is waged against innocent (citizens, not military) and is non-discriminatory. Surprise is an essential component of terrorist tactics, so it is not unexpected that global terrorism attracted a great deal of attention for more than twenty years since 2001. The USA had not been the only battlefield. The UK, Spain and France experienced heavy terrorist attacks (especially the November 2015 Paris attacks), although with fewer victims and destruction than the USA during 9/11.

As already stated, the success of terrorism is closely connected with the element of surprise. It turned out, logically, that surprise became a master strategic concept or principle of that time. As with other new concepts, such as asymmetry, uncertainty, and friction, surprise is not easily operationalised outside a narrow range of tactical parameters. However, with terrorism, the

challenge was not a surprise but a surprise effect (Gray, 2005). The 9/11 attacks, for example, represent an enormous failure of the US Intelligence Community. Despite the evidence missed by Washington, the attacks partly succeeded because the CIA was not sharing its secrets with the FBI and vice versa. The Joint Inquiry Report (of the representatives from the Senate and House" stated that "Within the Intelligence Community, agencies did not adequately share relevant counter-terrorism information, prior to September 11" (US Congress, 2002, p. 77).

In terms of waging war, according to Clausewitz, the opponent that uses more violence and is not constrained in applying it is in advance.

"As the use of physical power to the utmost extent by no means excludes the cooperation of the intelligence, it follows that he who uses force unsparingly, without reference to the bloodshed involved, must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigour in its application. The former then dictates the law to the latter, and both proceed to extremities to which the only limitations are those imposed by the amount of counteracting force on each side" (Clausewitz, 2010, 44-45).

Consequently, in terms of Clausewitz's "absolute war", terrorists are closer to that "ideal" than national militaries. This is because they lack what Clausewitz explained as the characteristic of civilised organisations that restrict war from its totality, making it "real war." Another aspect is Clausewitz's "trinity", which could also be applied to both sides even though terrorist organisations are not nation-states, i.e. state actors.

War is "a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason" (Clausewitz, 2010, 73-74).

While terrorist organisations do not have a typical political instrument (government), they have leadership that mobilises and organises followers and members, cares for the organisation's sustainability (funding sources), defines its ideology and goals (politics and strategy), and influences the other two poles.

Whatever one's opinion of the international order, it has proven more resilient than many expected. Al Qaeda, for instance, has not been able to carry out another high-casualty attack on the West despite its intentions. Instead of weakening the United States or advancing the cause of a restored Caliphate, the attacks of September 2001 outraged the United States and much of the Western world, triggering large-scale military actions against Al Qaeda (A.Q.). It also alienated parts of the Muslim community who opposed civilian-targeted violence. Rather than pushing the West out of the Middle East, the attacks led to a more significant Western presence and strengthened relations between the Gulf States and Western nations. A decade later, many A.Q. leaders were dead or in hiding, and Bin Laden's strategy of targeting the "distant enemy" proved flawed. While the US found itself embroiled in prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, these wars did not hasten the establishment of the Caliphate. A.Q.'s strategic, long-term approach was increasingly overshadowed by a more violent and populist form of direct action, exemplified by figures like Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who, during the Iraq insurgency, targeted both US forces and Shia communities. By his death in 2006, various Islamist groups had unified under the name Islamic State.

However, the broader global jihad movement has seen limited success overall. It has thrived in areas of instability and lack of governance but has struggled against organised opposition. The collapse of the Iraqi Army and the resulting access to equipment, along with the chaos of the Syrian civil war, allowed the Islamic State to temporarily expand by attracting foreign fighters. While it captured cities like Mosul and Raqqa in 2014, it could not retain them against sustained attacks from conventional forces.

Militant Islamism has been successful in toppling weak regimes but has not managed to establish or hold a stable state. The mass-casualty attacks in Europe in 2015-2016 caused fear and destruction. Still, such attacks significantly decreased after Raqqa fell in 2017, with subsequent attacks mainly conducted by radicalised individuals rather than foreign-directed operations. The extreme violence and sectarian nature of the Islamic State, particularly its stance against Shia Muslims, have cost it much of its potential support. Ironically, militant Islam's most significant impact has been seen in the radicalisation of some Muslim communities in Europe, an unforeseen consequence in 2001 but an issue with significant implications.

How successful was the war on terror(ism)?

The Global War on Terror was a comprehensive strategy launched by the United States in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks orchestrated by Al-Qaeda. Its primary objective was to dismantle terrorist organisations that posed a threat to the security of the US and its allies.

This strategy encompassed multiple elements, including military action against terrorist groups and their state sponsors, intelligence gathering and sharing, diplomatic initiatives to isolate and pressure nations supporting terrorism, and efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the Muslim world. The military dimension commenced with the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda's network and remove the Taliban from power (see more at Jackson and Sinclair, 2012). In 2003, the US invaded Iraq, citing the presence of weapons of mass destruction and aiming to weaken state sponsors of terrorism in the region.

The intelligence and diplomatic efforts were geared toward detecting and disrupting terrorist plots, dismantling networks, and fostering international collaboration through intelligence sharing and coordinated counter-terrorism initiatives. Promoting democracy and human rights in the Muslim world was seen as a long-term solution to addressing the root causes of terrorism.

This approach aimed to mitigate grievances and frustrations that extremists exploited to gain support.

In essence, the Global War on Terror sought to employ a diverse array of tools to dismantle terrorist organisations, prevent future attacks, and foster regional stability and security. The GWOT, vast in scope, was a complex and multi-pronged campaign. Military engagement spanned from full-scale wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to covert missions in Yemen and extensive military aid programs supporting allied regimes. This period also saw considerable growth in defence spending. Beyond the battlefield, counter-terrorism efforts extended domestically. New legislation, such as the USA Patriot Act (US Congress, 2001) and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, introduced sweeping changes to national security frameworks. Thousands of suspects were detained, and surveillance and intelligence initiatives were expanded through agencies like the FBI, the National Security Agency (NSA), and local authorities. Additionally, emergency response protocols were enhanced, and security measures were tightened at airports, borders, and major public gatherings.

Concerning strategic concepts, this "clash of civilisations" crystallised around principles anchored in the various doctrinal documents. The capstone American documents of the GWOT era were the National Security Strategy – NSS 2002 (published in 2002), the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (published in 2006) and the National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism - NMSPWT (published in 2006). These three texts rely heavily on military means. In Chapter IX, the US NSS 2002 underlines, "It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength ... decisively defeat any adversary if deterrence fails". It emphasises the presence of American forces overseas. The second (latter) document declares that "Iraq is the central front in the global war on terror", which means that, in the short term, the central goal is to "defeat the terrorists and neutralise the insurgency". The NMSPWT provides a framework which

"facilitates the synchronisation of the global WOT and the coordination of these efforts with other military requirements."

The Afghanistan campaign aimed to dismantle Taliban control since the group was a proven ally of terrorist organisations and to bring those responsible to justice on Afghan soil. This was a fully-fledged military operation initiated after the Taliban were issued an ultimatum to surrender those accountable, with backing from the United Nations Security Council. The campaign was conducted as an exercise of self-defence, garnering unanimous international support.

The US and the US-led coalition's military strategies turned out to be outmoded and irrelevant on the battlefield. Furthermore, it may be argued that the decision to shape the Counter-insurgency (COIN) Doctrine in Afghanistan in "a rhetoric expression and empathetic language was a strategic choice to win over the Indigenous populations rather than being a normative underpinning of a population-centred approach" (Mujahid, 2016). Furthermore, Afghanistan's internal dynamics were not considered when paving a path forward. Lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of the conditions on the ground, the US policies under the strategy of COIN were one of the reasons why the US tried to make Afghanistan viable in terms of institutions (government, military, etc.) for that long. Maybe it was impossible at all because nation-building typical for Western countries was not applicable in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda's objectives, lacking a realistic foundation, ultimately led to its inevitable failure. This collapse was hastened by the Bush Administration's Global War on Terror, bolstered by international alliances spearheaded by Washington, which led to the destruction of most Al-Qaeda training camps and headquarters in Afghanistan and, ultimately, the execution of its leader, Osama bin Laden. However, setbacks in Iraq and the later withdrawal from Afghanistan reveal a different dimension of this conflict, highlighting the substantial financial, political, and moral costs that stemmed from overestimating the threat.

Placing the entire fight against international terrorism under the sign of war had significant drawbacks. The cause of the fight against terrorism, being legitimate, led to placing American action under the emblem of just war. This led to treating as treason or moral fault the doubts about how to conduct it. However, unlawful practices in judicial harassment[7] by the United States, particularly in Guantanamo Bay, against individuals who were not always dangerous terrorists reinforced the feeling of injustice and humiliation within the Muslim world (COE, 2005).

The linkage America established between the war on terrorism and the idea of preemptive warfare raised concerns among US allies, impacted global peace and security, and stirred apprehension within the United Nations (Kumar, 2014). The 2003 US invasion of Iraq had similar outcomes, further intensifying anti-Western and anti-American sentiment across the Middle East and the broader Islamic world.

War became a defining element in the United States' political response, strategic approach, and legal framework for combating international terrorism. However, framing this effort as a "war" brings several significant drawbacks. Gilles Andréani provides six reasons why. First, it grants undeserved legitimacy and status to the adversary. Second, it overemphasises the military dimension in addressing global terrorism. Third, this framing led the United States to stretch both domestic legal standards and international law to fit the "war on terror" paradigm. Fourth, linking the fight against terrorism with the notion of preventive war has raised concerns among US allies, weakening the broader coalition against terrorism. Fifth, associating this struggle with the Iraq conflict has exacerbated anti-Western and anti-American sentiments in the Middle East and Islamic world. Finally, the "war on terror" narrative has diverted attention from critical

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[7] The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Council of Europe concluded "that the circumstances surrounding detentions by the USA at Guantánamo Bay show unlawfulness on grounds including the torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of detainees and violations of rights relating to prisoner-of-war status, the right to judicial review of the lawfulness of detention and the right to a fair trial" (COE, 2005)

political issues that contribute to the rise of terrorism in the Middle East (Andréani, 2004).

Discussion

Following the United Nations Charter's (in Articles 2(4) and 51) outlawing war, except in cases of self-defence and the disqualification of atomic weaponry in military conflicts, one might assume that modern organised warfare has been eradicated. Direct armed conflict seemed increasingly untenable. However, this scenario has inadvertently created a strategic paradox, enabling a shift from the nuclear standoff of the Cold War era to the rise of strategic terrorism. This evolution replaced fears of nuclear destruction with those of mass terrorism, exemplified by the events of September 11, 2001. These attacks on symbols of American power highlight how the inadequacies of a non-war framework, shaped by rigid global standards, have inadvertently facilitated the emergence of what Jean Dufourcq named hyperterrorism (Dufourcq, 2013). This phenomenon reflects the unintended consequences of a system designed to impose stability but lacking the flexibility to account for global diversity, affiliations, and interdependencies. The non-proliferation regime, rooted in a strategic monopoly, may well carry the seeds of the present-day strategic chaos within it.

The events of September 2001 marked the culmination of a vicious strategic cycle. Historically, terrorism has been used as a tool for identity-driven mobilisation and as a strategic weapon, from ancient Roman tactics to the large-scale bombings of World War II and the liberation struggles of the 20th century. However, hyperterrorism signifies a transformation, a reaction to a global order perceived as stifling and strategically restrictive. In scenarios where military inferiority precludes the restoration of a favourable power balance, hyperterrorism seems to become a viable alternative, particularly when cloaked in the rhetoric of the Holy War. Disenfranchised states and systems turn to this form of terrorism to challenge, constrain, and destabilise developed societies, exploiting vulnerabilities in their perceived

invulnerability. This dynamic underscore the failure of a world system that sought to eliminate conventional warfare. While the post-World War II prohibition of war benefited Europe and the broader northern hemisphere, it neither addressed the root causes of global imbalances nor resolved socioeconomic and ethno-religious tensions. At best, these tensions were suppressed; at worst, they were left to grow without control. The international community overlooked the unintended consequences of imposing regulation without adequately addressing underlying disparities, leading to a resurgence of strategic challenges as memories of 20th-century European wars faded. This legacy has shaped the post-9/11 era. Pursuing absolute security and minimal constraints fostered a system of overregulation, which paradoxically invited unconventional responses, whether through weapons of strategic superiority or acts of terror. In such circumstances, nuclear deterrence is rendered ineffective against global terrorism, as no defence is foolproof.

The broader lesson is clear: a strategy centred on domination and resistance is unsustainable. Instead, collaboration and shared interests should guide international relations. This perspective underpins European integration, which, despite its challenges, demonstrates the potential for sustainable cooperation. In a multipolar world, strategic strength will increasingly depend on replacing ideology and technological dominance with ethical frameworks and economic partnerships, fostering a cooperative vision among states. The path forward requires a diversified approach that balances strategic freedom with mutual dependence and recognition of diversity. Counter-terrorism must also transcend policing and preemptive strikes to foster cooperative resilience.

The paradox of modern strategy is evident with NATO, arguably the strongest military alliance in history, led by a superpower - the United States, yet unable to deter destabilising forces or decisively prevent disruptions. The failure to adapt strategic communication and confront emerging threats on unconventional battlegrounds reveals the limitations of Cold

War-era reflexes in addressing contemporary challenges. During the War in Ukraine (which started in 2022), as some scholars noted, various actors have applied a unique type of deterrence by denial: the threat to deliver arms (Lupovici, 2023).

This evolving dialectic necessitates urgent attention as it concerns the future of war in managing conflicts and contradictions. The prohibition of war and its role in stabilisation now face significant challenges. While the international community remains constrained by the need for legitimacy, multilateral cooperation, and minimising civilian casualties, these constraints can signal indecision and weakness, providing opportunities for adversaries to exploit.

Ultimately, the strategic landscape demands a reassessment of how conflicts are addressed in a fragmented world. Acknowledging and addressing these systemic weaknesses can only establish a more stable and cooperative global order.

Conclusion

More than twenty years after its declaration, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has left a complex and ambivalent legacy. While significant progress has been made in dismantling key terrorist networks and disrupting their operations, the unintended consequences of the GWOT strategy highlight the limitations of a militarised approach to counter-terrorism. Regional instability, increased radicalisation, and the erosion of international trust are among the enduring challenges that have emerged.

As the world transitions into a multipolar era, where state actors regain prominence as global threats, the strategic frameworks developed during the GWOT period appear increasingly inadequate. The inherent paradox of pursuing absolute security while neglecting the socio-political root causes of terrorism underscores the need for a paradigm shift. Addressing state and non-state threats requires balancing military capabilities and non-military strategies, including economic development, diplomatic engagement, and cultural understanding.

The "hard power approach" of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) involved the use of military force, intelligence operations, and direct intervention to combat terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda. This strategy achieved tangible successes, including the weakening of Al-Qaeda's leadership and operational capabilities, as well as the disruption of their ability to plan large-scale attacks. The targeted military actions, such as drone strikes and special operations, played a key role in dismantling terrorist networks in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. In some cases, the immediate threats were neutralised, and the capacity of these groups to carry out global-scale operations was significantly reduced.

However, this approach came with unintended consequences. The use of force, particularly in regions like Iraq and Afghanistan, often led to civilian casualties, infrastructure destruction, and a destabilisation of local governments. These outcomes fuelled resentment, bred further radicalisation, and sometimes even strengthened the resolve of insurgent groups. In some instances, the collateral damage inadvertently contributed to the rise of new terrorist factions, as local populations became more sympathetic to anti-Western ideologies. For example, the Iraq War, despite its declared objective of eliminating weapons of mass destruction and overthrowing Saddam Hussein, created a power vacuum and contributed to the insurgency that would later become ISIS.

The international community must adopt a more holistic approach to security and counterterrorism to build on the lessons learned from the GWOT. This means moving beyond the reliance on military might alone and incorporating strategies that emphasise resilience, cooperation, and respect for local cultures and political structures. A comprehensive strategy would involve diplomatic engagement, economic development, and human rights support to address the root causes of extremism, such as poverty, injustice, and political disenfranchisement. Additionally, the approach must be adaptable, recognising that

the nature of modern conflict and terrorism is constantly evolving.

Policymakers should take the lessons of the past 30 years seriously, understanding that proper global security requires a nuanced approach. Achieving lasting peace and stability cannot be accomplished through force alone, nor by imposing a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, it requires a deep understanding of the complexities of modern conflicts, whether through peacebuilding efforts, conflict resolution, or dialogue between diverse communities. By doing so, the world would have a chance to move toward a more cooperative and sustainable global order that reduces the appeal of extremism and enhances international security in a way that reflects the interconnectedness of today's world.

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