Communication Patterns in the ›War on Terrorism‹ and Their Potential for Escalation or Deescalation of the Conflict

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Abstract: Communication is a powerful factor in times of peace and conflict alike. This article analyses the communications of political elites in the United States and Germany in the ›War on Terrorism‹. Both states are engaged in countering the threat of international terrorism, but do so with distinct policies, and this is mirrored in their discourses. The different approaches are influenced by self-image and historical experience, by a different understanding of terrorism, and by national interests. They also have different potentials for escalating or deescalating the confrontation with international terrorism.

Keywords: War on terrorism / war on terror, security policy, U.S., Germany, communication, escalation, deescalation
Krieg gegen den Terrorismus / Krieg gegen den Terror, Sicherheitspolitik, USA, Deutschland, Kommunikation, Eskalation, Deeskalation

1. Introduction

Communication is a powerful factor and means in times of peace and conflict. The communication patterns in the ›War on Terrorism‹ have specific dynamics and are fed by the various ideas, perceptions, interpretations and resulting policy choices of the respective state and security actors.

This case study deals with the communication patterns of the American and German political leadership in the fight against terrorism. Chances for deescalation in the actual ›War on Terrorism‹ are extracted and highlighted. The value added is the uncovering of how certain patterns of communication can feed or help dissolve a conflict. By understanding the processes involved in the reactions against terrorism and in the ›War on Terrorism‹, a more critical stance is enabled. Further escalation could be decreased, thus contributing to more peaceful relations among opposing actors.

Terrorism can be seen as a conflict of international scope. The ›War on Terrorism‹ or ›War on Terror‹ is a way of talking about this conflict and of participating in and affecting it. The American approach – of the G.W. Bush administration – to international terrorism is very contested, primarily by members of the international community but also increasingly among the American population. Does this approach further fuel the conflict, as many critics say, or does it indeed bear chances to succeed in the longer run? How can the war rhetoric be understood? What impact does it have? How is the ›other‹ constructed in the U.S. versus in Germany: as ›enemy‹, as rival or as a challenge? How does each actor perceive its own role? In answering these questions, the impact of American and German national identity will be considered as significant factor.

The paper discusses current American and German approaches, using results from interviews with German and American decision makers and experts in foreign and security policy, as well as from an analysis of security strategy documents. For reasons of anonymity, interviews are not identified here; all were held from March to June 2007 in Germany and the U.S. The work is based on research on communication, identity, perception and conflict processes. Finally, factors with potential to fuel or to defuse the conflict are examined. Attention is paid to the construction of enemies and enmity-promoting perceptions.

2. American and German Approaches

By now, even in the U.S. the term ›War on Terrorism‹ (or ›War on Terror‹) is increasingly contested and Washington has made some moves to distance from it. But in the U.S. the use of this term enables greater mobilization, while the expression ›War on …‹ itself is more common and used to emphasize the need to work on a certain issue with urgency, as in the ›War on Drugs‹. In Germany this term is neither used nor would it be useful, reflecting a different political and social environment.

Germans have difficulty understanding the American policy on terrorism, its justifications and implementation and they easily disagree with it. Instead of only criticizing the American policy, however, efforts should be made to arrive at a better understanding of the underlying factors motivating American actions. A better understanding of these is essential for more successfully engaging with and having any chance of influencing American policy.

From the view of Americans and American decision makers, the rhetoric is meant to justify extraordinary measures in a – for them – extraordinary time. Public support needs to be mobilized, unity within the administration maintained and allies rallied. The U.S. had been following an active foreign policy with a large overseas presence for some time. But 9/11 shaped an even more outward-looking administration and policy. The administration of George W. Bush sees a greater global presence as vital for protecting American interests. The prevention of attacks on the homeland is a primary national interest.

One might ask whether the American policy on terrorism is also motivated to a large extent by fear. 9/11 left great trauma in its wake. It is often overlooked or minimized that Germans and Europeans did not experience 9/11 and therefore find American trauma and reactions hard to understand. Still, there are also other contextual factors in the U.S. that may lead to greater

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belligerency compared to Germany, especially when national security is perceived to be under attack. The two countries' different political cultures (understood here as the manner of political decision making of a national group) and historical experiences play a substantial role here.

Neither Europeans nor Germans could state with any certainty how much the U.S. may be overreacting now to the threat of terrorism. But the current American approach can hardly be called successful, considering America's loss of legitimacy worldwide, its activities in the pursuit and interrogation of suspected terrorists, its quite possible failure in Iraq due to partly incorrect estimates and inadequate preparation for the tasks at hand, but also the civil rights intrusions for American citizens. In the current American administration the term ›enemy‹ is used to describe people or groups that must be fought and won against. Policy radiates from this frame of mind, having translated into huge expenditures, new institutions and agencies, and greatly increased personnel in addition to constructed perceptions.

Comparing these thought processes and their consequent policies with the German communication patterns on terrorism and the fight against it, the differences outweigh the common dynamics.[2] While it is true that German decision makers abstain from applying the term ›enemy‹ to anyone – at least for now – as a lesson from the World War experience, they also see terrorism in a different manner, in less absolute terms and more ambivalently. Above all they see terrorism as one threat among others, or even as a problem rather than a threat. Many also see root causes for terrorism – of social and economic nature, which they understand as something that can be worked on and improved. Arguably then, there is no reason to label someone as an enemy, thus indicating a different frame of mind from the American one.

Germans also have a different experience with terrorism, which would account for their different policy. But this may only be true until Germany experiences a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11. If such an attack would occur, German counterterrorism policy might shift. So far, however, German decision makers see terrorism more as a criminal issue to be addressed by law enforcement and not by the military.

2.1. U.S. Strategy Documents

American strategy documents highlight international terrorism as the number one threat to the U.S. as well as a threat to freedom and the world. On September 11, 2001 President Bush talked of America having »been moved to defend« their country. While the attack was horrendous and done by those who are »evil«, no one can »keep ... [America's] light from shining« (Bush, 2001a). Bush vowed to bring justice and defeat the enemies of America and of freedom. He spoke of a new kind of war, a long war for all those who believe in freedom. But it is important to note that he also cautioned against unwise reactions or intolerance (Bush, 2001b).

The U.S. is very concerned with state-sponsored terrorism and terrorists using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (National

Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 2006, p. 9). In terms of motivations for terrorists, emphasis is placed on political alienation, manipulation of grievances, existing local subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation, an ideology that misinterprets religion in order to justify and glorify murdering innocents for one's own purposes (ibid, p. 9-10).

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America of 2006 connects tyranny to terrorism and identifies terrorism as a threat to freedom. It therefore calls for the spread of democracy, political reform and economic freedom as one sure way to counter both tyranny and terrorism as well as the misinformation spread by terrorists (The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2006, p. 3-4, 11, 27). Free nations must unite to take the battle against terrorism to the terrorists and to defeat them in all possible ways (ibid, p. 8). The current Iraq situation and the religion of Islam are said to be politically utilized by terrorists (ibid, p. 9).

Prevention of future terrorist attacks include the pursuit and capture or killing of terrorists, the elimination of any support or sanctuary for terrorists, and the denial of WMD to rogue states or supporters of terrorism. Afghanistan and Iraq must be won, while regional conflicts are understood as a source of conflict potentially affecting national security (ibid, p. 12, 14).

The Quadrennial Defense Review of 2006 makes extensive use of the terms ›enemy‹ and ›threat‹ in their word variations in the context of the U.S. fighting terrorism (Quadrennial Defense Review, 2006). The frequent application of these terms to describe terrorism and related issues affecting U.S. national security or the safety of Americans indicates a different use of these terms in American society, which may well be accepted and normal. On the other hand, a sense of urgency and a perceived need for extraordinary measures is being purposefully expressed.

2.2. Interviews of American Decision Makers and Experts[3]

For most American interviewees – representing the Congress, State Department, the defense establishment and think tanks – the threats are real. They perceive dangerous people on a mission to harm others for political aims and they emphasize the need to be prepared. Although some said that the terrorist efforts may now be less centrally organized and more spontaneous, they agreed that the danger has not at all decreased.

Interviewees stressed the importance of considering both the implementation of threats and the scale and nature of destruction and disruption. It makes an enormous difference whether the means are bio-nuclear, airplanes as in 9/11 or bombings as in Madrid, London and Oklahoma. Of course, nuclear weapons are extremely destructive in any context. But it must equally be considered how an implemented threat would impede the ability of decision makers to function.

Terrorism was seen as an almost existential threat, while international terrorism was perceived as the number one threat today. 9/11 was a defining moment in U.S. national security, with the effect of framing all other global security issues. Aspects such as the balance of power thus gain little room for discus-

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2 It should be noted here that German policy is embedded in that of the European Union. Distinguishing the various influences goes far beyond the scope of this study. On the other side, suffice it here to say that much of German security policy is also still made in Germany.

3 For citations from the interview sections, please contact author.

sion. Some of the interviewees spoke of these effects, warning of negative implications for American policy at home and abroad. A few argued for lesser or less stringent counterterrorism measures due to counterproductive effects.

A minority view was expressed by one expert, who stated that the U.S. does not really face many national security threats, unless nuclear weapons are involved. The American security debate today was said to focus too much on the terrorist use, which is dangerous when it leads to irrational behavior.

Another expert saw terrorism as having become mixed with other important issues. The most important challenges may rather be how to deal with technological threats, economic competition, globalization, environmental damage and the difficulties of maintaining an open yet secure way of life. Some saw a constellation of threats, including the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, North Korea, a still dangerous Russia, an increasingly dangerous Middle East, weak states, proliferation, competitors like China and global warming as conflict sources.

Terrorism was most often described as a transnational threat and criminal act. Consequently, interviewees argued, terrorists ought to be treated as criminals. Some said that Bush calling it a ›war‹ is not useful, but that the term helps to justify to the public the measures taken.

Although terrorism was always a great concern, since 9/11 it has moved to center stage with increased intelligence and defense spending as well as intellectual interest. But as the U.S. has little psychological experience with loss on its own soil, room for scaremongering exists, which the Bush-administration has utilized for mobilization.

In terms of addressing terrorism, interviewees concentrated on the need for more in-depth intelligence to better understand the relevant actors, more diplomatic efforts and public diplomacy, less militarization of foreign affairs, more civilian approaches, a better balance between short-term and long-term strategies to address immediate and underlying issues, and more cooperative security. Physical security for infrastructure, deterrence and the ability to respond militarily were seen as important to maintaining credibility. But social policies would also be needed to provide opportunities for people and societies to develop in peace.

Among the greatest lessons mentioned from the last few years were the views that it can be dangerous to mix motives and that a war of arms is easier fought than one of ideas. Furthermore, responses to terrorism also need to be balanced with other issues.

2.3. German Strategy Documents

German strategy documents emphasize the prevention of international conflicts and crises as the primary way to deal with the challenge of international terrorism. Terrorism is clearly not ranked as first priority, but rather as part and parcel of other issues.

The Defense Policy Guidelines of 2003 speak of a situation with new threats stemming from international terrorism, WMD proliferation, regional conflicts and information-warfare. Civil and military means are both seen as necessary tools in meeting these challenges. The protection of Germany's population and territory has won new meaning due to the growing threat posed by international terrorism (Verteidigungspolitische Richtlinien, 2003, p. 8, 20, 28).

The White Book of 2006 mentions the term ›enemy‹ (*Feind/Feinde*) only once, and then in an abstract manner (Weißbuch, 2006, p. 109). It also uses the term ›threat‹ (*Bedrohung*) in its variations in the context of terrorism much less frequently than comparable American documents. WMD proliferation is mentioned both by itself and in connection with terrorist use (ibid, p. 8, 9, 11).

The White Book talks of international terrorism as a central challenge for Germany and the international community. German security policy is purposefully shaped in a multilateral and comprehensive manner. The military is clearly seen as an insufficient tool for dealing with the terrorist threat (ibid, p. 8, 9), while social and economic factors are viewed as precursors for terrorism (ibid, p. 21). Overall, terrorism is understood as an important but not overriding issue. That the threat of international terrorism for German security policy has not risen to the top of the priority list is also evidenced by the much smaller number of documents written to address it.

2.4. Interviews of German Decision Makers and Experts[4]

German interviewees – representing the *Bundestag*, the foreign and defense ministries as well as think tanks – mostly revealed a number of different perspectives but also some shared views. While some German decision makers saw terrorist attacks – in big cities with mass gatherings, with a kidnapped plane or a dirty bomb, directed against the state and with a 9/11-scale – as possible threats to Germany today, only a few said that terrorism is now the primary threat to Germany. Terrorism was said to have become manifest – meaning that it has become publicly visible – which changed the perception of it. When combined with weapons of mass destruction though, terrorism was seen by more of the interviewees as a large threat. However, most emphasized other issues such as weak states, energy supply or climate change.

Interviewees categorized terrorism more specifically into Islamist terrorism against the West, terrorism promoted through organized crime and under the cover of religion, and true political terrorism (for example, ETA in Spain). They saw terrorists as aiming to weaken, damage or destroy the existing Western order and openly demonstrating their ability to do so. The saying that ›one's terrorist is another's freedom fighter‹ seems to be more common in Germany – hence the apparently greater ambivalence in German perceptions of terrorism.

Overall, threats were described as being very diverse. Caution was levied on the understanding of the term ›threat‹, as it is subjective. While threats were seen as more difficult, more encompassing, less obvious and therefore more treacherous, the threat of terrorism was not seen as high for Germany. A minority opinion was that Western policies themselves are threatening, as in the ›War on Terrorism‹, which could possibly multiply threats.

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4   For citations from the interview sections, please contact author.

Interviewees argued for a greater differentiation of terrorists, as they are motivated by various reasons, even within the same region. Additionally, many terrorists grew up in Western societies, which indicates that certain developments in Western countries themselves went unnoticed.

German decision makers follow a strategy that maintains diverse tools, even if not all are implemented due to differences with allies and limited capabilities. Those interviewed saw a need for elements of law enforcement, intercultural, language and conflict resolution skills, more diplomats able to engage in cultural work, more international cooperation in law enforcement and intelligence, the closing of safe havens for terrorists or their resources, and effective, passive security. Threats should be evaluated neither with trivialization nor exaggeration. Any underlying reasons for terrorism should be better identified and worked on multilaterally.

While some see a lacking coherent strategy against terrorism, others highlight a few smaller successes in Afghanistan and credit these to the differentiated German approach.

The still strong pacifism in the German population was said to aid the use of civil instruments. But interviewees also see lessons to learn from recent experiences – and even more so for the U.S., for example the mistake to rely too heavily on the military, as this fulfills terrorists' expectations. While some acknowledged that the U.S. is learning in this area, many see the American approach as one of scaremongering. Some declared that President Bush has made the fight against terrorism into a war.

For Germany, an important lesson remains not to engage in risky undertakings. In practice, this means that German participation in Afghanistan may be considered legitimate only up to a certain point.

2.5. Summary of Comparison

When comparing decision makers and strategy documents on both sides, multilateral approaches were ranked much higher in Germany. But both sides emphasized a great need for cooperation in fighting terrorism across the Atlantic and globally. Another shared view was that terrorism is also a threat to democracy when it causes less than democratic reactions. Democracies must pay careful attention to their reactions to terrorists and terrorism. While both sides essentially agree on this point, they still follow different policies. This apparent contradiction can be explained by diverging threat perceptions.

Overall, international terrorism ranks much higher on the American security agenda than on the German one. American decision makers seem more prone to speak from a more belligerent, fighting stance about the threat of terrorism and how to counter it. They may generally think more in terms of friend versus foe, notwithstanding some exceptions. German decision makers see issues and actors in a more ambivalent and nuanced way. They do not speak of enemies, but they do perceive threats. There is a different attribution of the causes and motivations of terrorism, which also accounts for some of the differences in perceptions and policies of decision makers in both countries.

3. Factors with the Potential to Fuel or Defuse Conflict

Communication, as human vehicle to transmit thoughts, express emotions, negotiate, convince, point to and transport world views and inherent images, plays a not-to-be-underestimated role in promoting conflicts or options for their solution. How different actors communicate with and towards others can sharpen conflict dynamics or serve as constructive steps toward engagement.

The communication in the American ›War on Terror‹ and the German fight against terrorism illustrate in a number of ways the two countries' different views of the phenomenon of terrorism and their motivations for responding to it. It also points to different potentials to affect the conflict – positively or negatively.

The rhetoric on enemies found in the American approach carries a certain danger. It not only advances enmity-promoting perceptions, but also can actually construct enemies. All of this creates further conflict potential. The term ›enemy‹ is likely to create a more belligerent framework in which thinking, evaluation, interpretation and policy-making take place. It constructs a reality of enemies which colors all else.

Enemies can also be imagined. One can with a degree of certainty argue that if you prepare for mobilization and war – even rhetorically – you will more likely have a war. Dynamics are generated that lead to a certain manner of interpretation and certain actions that spiral upward and limit further choices. The threat potential of enemies can begin to appear larger than justified. This tends to cause real actions that lead to the confirmation of the perceived threat and enemy, in turn causing yet more actions to react to the perceived larger threat. One side then reacts to the other, and the conflict grows in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The feeling of threat within the American population also may increase due to the constant state of mobilization and calls to beware of the enemies. The effect can be a dulling of the population, demands for more radical responses feeding back into the political cycle, or both at the same time. None of these are desirable.

The enemy-rhetoric and its resulting dynamics are clearly factors which fuel the conflict and contribute to the growing radicalization of the actors involved. The severity of threats is actually increased and the opposite of the desired outcome is achieved.

As the term ›enemy‹ is not found in a specific application in German rhetoric, these dynamics then are different in Germany and the U.S. German decision makers see risks and challenges that can and need to be dealt with in a multilateral and much more soft-powered manner. The German approach relies much more on the use of civil tools and is reflected in the rhetoric.

There is little feeling of actual threat from terrorists among many German decision makers, even though Germany continues its counterterrorism measures as well. The different rhetoric in Germany and the more balanced reactions to the terrorist threat mutually support each other.

German communication in the fight against terrorism carries more potential for dissolving the conflict than the American counterpart. It does not contribute to further escalation by increasing conflict dynamics. No enemy is ›made‹ – and whenever the term is used, it is done so in an abstract manner. The frame of mind for German counterterrorism policy is not colored by perceptions or talk of specific enemies. This should – if Germany would want and be allowed to play a greater role – have a positive impact on the conflict and its dynamics.

In the U.S., 9/11 and the resultant threat perceptions and rhetoric have led to the change, shift and creation of enormous resources, personnel, institutions and finances to focus national attention on the ›War against Terrorism‹. Germany, in contrast, has seen a much more moderate shift in its focus on counterterrorism. Political debate on the responses to terrorism has been greater in Germany, while in the U.S. any diverging views have in recent years often been muted and are only now beginning to gain more space. After the 2008 presidential election some of the policy might shift, but probably not to the degree that Europeans or Germans think and hope for – as much of the underlying factors remain the same. The American approach will likely continue along similar lines, with a heavy emphasis on military means and talk of enemies. The policy and actions may soften a bit, but the frame of mind and the rhetoric will not change drastically.

The developments in Iraq have shown the American approach to be, at least thus far, ineffective. Many, including Americans, speak of a possible or already visible failure there.

Supporting some groups against others – following the motto ›my enemy's enemy is my friend‹ – is reminiscent of the support of the Taliban in Afghanistan against the Soviets. In this light, there seems to have been little learning on the American side. A more balanced approach toward the different groups could prove more constructive.

In the conflict with Iran and its nuclear program, the U.S. administration has in the beginning followed the same rhetorical road as in the lead-up to the Iraq War. Since then, periods of seemingly more openness for dialogue and of enemy-rhetoric followed after one another. It remains to be seen which course the U.S. will take. In the case of Iran, however, it is highly questionable whether dialogue alone will hinder its nuclear program.

Conceptually, it is very important to differentiate not only different types of ›terrorism‹, but also the actors involved. The phrases ›War on Terrorism‹ and ›fight against terrorism‹ are vague and put many actors into one large pool. Lumping actors together in this manner creates significant weaknesses in counterterrorism thinking. In order to be able to fight tactics of terrorism or terrorists and prevent terrorist actions, it is fruitful to introduce specifications in terms of strategies, actors, methods and goals. This would enable more precise reactions to counter the threat.

On the other hand, one could argue that the vagueness is perhaps intended, as it allows a wide room for interpretation and therefore a wide application of counter-strategies. At first glance this seems to be the case on the American side. However, interview results show recognition on the part of some that greater differentiation in language and policy is needed to address different groups in more suitable ways. Some interviewees see it as a mistake to think and speak of Islamism or Fundamental Islamism in a monolithic manner. There is not one monolithic actor, but different groups with at times distinct interests. Some of these groups are opposed to one another due to internal strife or quest for dominance.

Differentiation would allow us to deal with the various actors in different ways. Even cooperation may be possible with some groups and increase the effectiveness in the fight against terrorism. A greater level of differentiation can contribute to defusing the conflict.

Different mechanisms and differently informed communication patterns can shape perceptions and behavior more constructively. New ways of thinking, seeing and talking can be built into concepts and strategies to shape action and outcomes. Waging war has not produced the desired effects. Perhaps ideas of reconciliation, justice, greater mutual trust and solidarity, as well as the willingness to work on a renewal of relations and to make constructive steps towards a perceived ›enemy‹ can be more effective. Certainly, they carry more chances for peace in this conflict today. It is therefore imperative that politicians develop a better understanding of different communication dynamics and their potential.

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