How cooperation between EU states shapes counterterrorism policies

Cooperation between EU states has become increasingly important in the fight against terrorism. But what types of cooperation are most beneficial? Drawing on a new study, **Mario Gilli** *and* **Paolo Tedeschi** *find that intelligence cooperation is associated with more efficient defensive policies than unanimous political cooperation.*

Transnational terrorism and counterterrorism policies are vitally important in Europe. Between 2010 and 2016, more than 300 people were killed in terrorist attacks in the European Union, and since 2015, there has been a new wave of jihadist terrorism across European countries. The EU adopted a new Global Strategy in 2016 that sets out some of the main principles of its counterterrorism policies. However, EU countries continue to have frontline responsibility for security.

Counterterrorism policies in the EU

In general, government counterterrorism policies can incorporate three different approaches. First, there are military-based policies that treat the fight against terrorist organisations as a form of warfare. Second, there are police-based approaches that treat terrorism as a form of criminal activity to be detected and defeated using the criminal justice system (either within the existing system or via a specially modified version). Finally, there are political approaches that attempt to resolve terrorism through negotiation and a political process.

Counterterrorism policies can be both proactive and defensive. Proactive measures directly target terrorists and, by weakening their ability to attack, protect the public. Defensive measures, in contrast, seek to protect a potential target. Unilateral defensive measures may induce terrorists to replace one target with another, possibly a foreign one.

Thus, although countries may establish counterterrorism policies independently, the results of these decisions are interdependent and potentially lead to inefficient results that fail to maximise the common welfare of countries. These positive and negative externalities of different counterterrorism measures raise the question of the best institutional framework for cooperation between countries.

Strategic choices

In a new study, we address this question by analysing the interaction between government decisions on defensive measures and citizens' propensity towards public order policies. We do so by considering a case where two countries are threatened by the same terrorist group and defensive policies are influenced by country-specific proactive measures.

In particular, our work considers a particular type of proactive counterterrorism measure: strategic intelligence and covert missions that are country-specific and could be taken for granted when a government plans defensive policies, as intelligence requires long-term planning. We also assume that proactive measures have two opposite effects.

First, they tend to backfire in the sense that terrorists prefer to attack countries that rely more on proactive policies, even if terrorists are not fully informed about a country's involvement in intelligence activities. Second, increased intelligence allows states to provide more effective defensive measures that reduce the effectiveness of terrorist groups. Note that in this model proactive policies are exogenous, and we focus on the connection between defensive policies and national citizens' attitudes.

The benefits of cooperation

We highlight the combined effect of voter propensity towards defensive policies, certain intelligence policies, and different institutional scenarios on the (in)efficient strategic choice of counter-terrorism defensive policies in democratic countries, where efficiency means maximising the joint welfare of countries. Within this complex interplay between proactive and defensive policies, the institutional reference point is the EU and its counterterrorism governance, as specified by the EU's Global Strategy. We compare four different institutional scenarios: full decentralisation, intelligence coordination, political union with a unanimous vote as the EU for security, and full integration.

These situations are modelled as a three-stage signalling game: so, for each scenario, we show the inefficiencies related to the lack of internalisation of the strategic effects of intelligence and defence policies; furthermore, these inefficiencies are related to the democratic accountability of countries depending on citizens' support for public order policies. In this context, we find that intelligence cooperation increases the possibility of efficient defensive policies more than unanimous political cooperation, which is a rather surprising result.

This is a case of second-best solutions: i.e. if there are institutional constraints, it is possible that the best solution involves changing other variables from the values that would otherwise be optimal. In particular, in this model, the risk of inefficient defensive policies has a complex relationship with the amount of institutional cooperation, unless public opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of or against law-and-order policies. So, if national authorities cooperate and exchange information, it is possible to build a partially efficient Security Union, while the EU's institutions might generate an excess of defensive policies due to the unanimity rule.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in [European Union Politics](#)

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