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Why do Countries Support Terrorist Groups?

Why do countries support proxy actors such as terrorist groups? This question remains puzzling despite some attempts to answer it for three reasons. First, the popular claim that weak states support terrorist groups because it is cost effective does not explain why rich or strong nations such as Saudi Arabia or India support or have supported terrorist groups in the past. Second, the claim that states support terrorist groups to propagate and spread their religious ideologies may explain why states such as Iran or Saudi Arabia supports terrorist groups. However, it does not quite explain why Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Pakistani army, which are not consistent advocates of Islam, support terrorists. Some studies claim that the Pakistani army and ISI have used religious ideologies more as a tool than a goal in itself. Third, states support terrorist groups despite dealing with credible commitment issues on the part of these groups. States can never be quite sure that terrorist groups will keep their end of the bargain, in which case states and groups/individuals that support them will have to pay a heavy price. Multiple attacks on Pervez Musharraf by militant groups that he and his government supported or on the late Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi by the Tamil Tigers that his party supported illustrate the fact.

This research hypothesizes that decline of relative power veers states towards supporting terrorist groups. The research will test the hypothesis using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The paper will use the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores which aggregate six individually measured components of national material capabilities into a single value per state year. The research intends to use the difference in CINC scores of two rival countries to measure the decline in relative power. Case studies will also be used to triangulate and add to the findings.

This research aims to contribute to the field of global security by highlighting structural causes that lead states to not only support terrorist groups but incorporate it into their national security strategies. This research also seeks highlight that states are not just culturally motivated. Their reasons for supporting terrorist groups go beyond ideological or religious affinity and lie in their position within the global structure, especially vis-à-vis their rivals. This paper wants to contribute to the study of great power politics by exploring why great and rising powers have supported terrorist groups at various times and why countries that are allied to great powers support terrorism, sometimes to the detriment of their allies. This research can provide important policy implications by highlighting that great powers can help curb terrorism not just by sanctioning states, but by working with them to improve their relative positions.