

The definition, and manipulation, of the term "terrorism"



DEFINING TERRORISM: AN AGE OLD PROBLEM

- Terrorism has no universally accepted definition, and almost always leads to political disputes. Its earliest attempt came from Russian anarchist terrorists themselves, who described it merely as part of "propaganda of the deed". It is most commonly perceived as a politically motivated violent act, creating a broad generalisation regarding the actors that has led to the common adage: "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". This definitional vacuum has created space for manipulation.
- Many actors have misused the term terrorism. On the one hand are individuals who use it to score political points (such as the far right). But more concerning is its state-sponsored manipulation by malign actors as part of systematic campaigns to publicly justify disproportionate security responses, denigrate their critics, and engage in 'Whataboutism'. This has been an effective tactic in the Kremlin's information operations.

Russia adds Alexei Navalny to national 'terrorists and extremists' list

Opposition leader's aides were also placed on the list.



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MANIPULATIONS OF DEFINITION

- Regimes like the Kremlin have frequently used terrorism and extremism as a flexible term to justify curtailing of domestic freedoms and to denigrate regime critics. Most commonly by incorporating vague language such as "disruptions to peace" into their definitions and anti-terror legislation.
- Both Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption organisation and the punk rock group Pussy Riot were branded "extremists". The latter being accused of "cultural terrorism" for their protests inside a Orthodox Church.
- The Chinese Communist Party has similarly used the term to undermine support for pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. Its National Security Law has also extended terrorism to cover "using violence or intimidation against people" - broad terms that can be applied to protests.

- **While the manipulation of the term terrorism has primarily been used by malign state actors domestically, it has also been used their international information operations, particularly in the Global South.**
- The Global South (especially the Middle East) has disproportionately suffered the most from terrorism and the War on Terror. The Kremlin and the CCP have utilised this in their disinformation campaigns; highlighting civilian casualties from Western counter-terror campaigns (especially the US) and brand it 'Western Terrorism'.
- The overall aim of these campaigns is to undermine Western credibility to the point that even if Kremlin or CCP wrongdoing is exposed, there is a general perception that the West is just the same (Whataboutism). Concerningly, this is becoming an increasingly prevalent view in the Global South.

HOW TO COUNTER IT

- An internationally accepted definition of terrorism implemented in international law is unlikely to come anytime soon. There are too many cultural influences, and its flexibility provides tactical and strategic advantages in information warfare campaigns for actors like the Kremlin and the CCP. **It is possible to push back on its manipulation by defining what it is NOT.** For example:
 - a. The recent alleged targeting of the Kerch bridge by Ukraine is not terrorism (as the Kremlin has argued). The Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) state that targeting infrastructure that serves a military purpose (such as the bridge, which was being used for military supplies) is acceptable. By contrast, the Kremlin's alleged tactics of deliberate targeting of civilians, civilian infrastructure and/or cultural sites could fall under the definition of terrorism (though are already considered War Crimes).
 - b. Non-violent resistance is not terrorism; it is recognised under International Human Rights Laws as part of Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- As Moscow accuses Kyiv of terrorism, and begins to push this narrative into the Global South, increasing awareness of the manipulation of the term is not just critical for resisting the Kremlin's current information war, but also for future information struggles.