China's Path to Deradicalization: A Strategic Communication Perspective

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Abstract

China has experienced terrorist attacks that have claimed lives and caused extensive damage to property. In response, the government has used both 'hard' and 'soft' power to rid the country of terrorism. The measures have reduced the incidents of terror attacks but there has been growing concern of radicalization of youths and other vulnerable groups. This paper therefore discusses the problem of radicalization and extremism in China and the current deradicalization efforts with the view of exposing some communication gaps. Strategic communication is advanced as an alternative approach to deradicalization and counterterrorism in China. It is argued that the approach will allow for coordination and liaison among the various units involved in counterterrorism as well as facilitating the communication of messages that empower the people to counter terrorist radicalization messages.

Keywords

China; Deradicalization; Strategic Communication.

1. Introduction

Since 2015, terrorist violence in China has significantly dropped. The decline in terrorist activities is however not to suggest the end of the problem of radicalization and extremism. Zhang Chunxian, former Party Secretary of Xinjiang Autonomous Region, noted in the 2016 China's National People's Congress meeting that although the number of terrorist crimes has sharply fallen down with the efforts of China's counterterrorism action, the situation of deradicalization was still severe. [1]The challenges in dealing with radicalization is illustrated by Green and Proctor (2016), [2]who point out that it is a process that often times is barely noticed as was the case before the September 11, 2001 attack in the United States of America (USA). In the case of China, the recent ISIS video suggests the persistence of the problem of extremism and the spread of radical ideology. China, like other countries faced with the problem of terrorism, has continued to pursue a number of approaches and deradicalization is one of the new fronts that has been recognized as possessing the potential to contain the problem.

2. Strategic Communication: A New Perspective To Deradicalization And Counterterrorism

Strategic communication is one of the new approaches that has attracted interests from different fields. It is therefore defined as; 'systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational, and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior.'.[3] At the level of governments and organizations, it means that strategic communication can be used to mobilize and coordinate recourses, provides information for specific intended people and influences them for reaching special strategic interests.

Traditional counterterrorism communication is usually task-oriented, which means that counterterrorism communication is based on some counterterrorism task. Resultantly, there are rushed responses which cannot lead to effective results. A strategic communication approach, on the

other hand, demands a systematic analysis of all the parts of counterterrorism communication before and defining a comprehensive, rigorous and scientific roadmap and timetable from an overall point of view to maximize the communication effects. These elements of strategic communication have attracted a number of countries and organization to advance the approach in counterterrorism communication. In the case of the United States, the UK, Australia and NATO, they have established a special department for strategic communication, in response to any unexpected incidents and security threats. The Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the Department of State, U.S., has established Counterterrorism Communication Center, coordinating information communication and cooperation from all the counterterrorism departments in the United States, which obviously improves efficiency and effects of American counterterrorism communication.[4] It can therefore be noted that the approach allows for full-resources integration and coordination as well as increasing the effectiveness of counterterrorism communication.

China, as illustrated above has used both 'hard' and 'soft' power approaches to confront the problem of extremism, radicalization and terrorism. The initiatives have notably resulted in the reduction of terrorist acts in China but there possible benefits which the country can draw from incorporating strategic communication. From a global perspective, extreme ideology communication, terrorist funds collection and terrorist skill training are all done through communication and media become a fertile ground for extreme terrorist thoughts to emerge and communicate. On the other hand, the process of deradicalization refers to a process of ideological transformation, eliminating the old and establishing the new. In light of this, deradicalization of China is not only undertaken on a top level, but carried out with administrative and legal means. Communication is supposed to be the highlight of deradicalization and counterterrorism struggle. Thus, theories of strategic communication are applied into deradicalization, and soft means and hard means are combined to fight against terrorism from national strategy and communication strategies.

3. Way Forward For China'S Deradicalization Communication Strategies

3.1 Establishing a Counterterrorism Strategic Communication Centre

One of the key elements in strategic communication is synchronization of words and deeds and effective coordination among the various actors. Counterterrorism is a complex operation that involves different actors from the civilian and security sectors at tactical, operational and strategic levels. The importance of coordination is underscored by a number of scholar who point out that lack of coordination often results in less effective and less credible counter-messaging while proper coordination reduces the risks of military and civilian actors communicating competing narratives, inappropriate framing of messages in relation to the target group, and a flawed timing of messaging.[5]A number of countries have therefore adopted strategic communication in their counterterrorism efforts. In 2004, the former President of America, Obama proposed the adoption of "strategic communication" and the establishment of a Counterterrorism Communication Center to coordinate all the communication efforts. Similarly, NATO has embraced strategic communication in its counterterrorism communication. Strategic communication has, therefore, become an important support point for NATO to reach its military aims.

China can draw lessons from these examples in order to attach more importance to information communication in order to position counterterrorism information communication at national level. A Counterterrorism Strategic Communication Center is therefore proposed to be established in the State Security Committee (SSC), directly responsible for the SSC to coordinate all the communication efforts from all the departments, such as military department, diplomacy department, media department, financial department, educational department and religious department and so forth. All these efforts aim at maximizing the communication effects of national strategic communication. In operational mechanism, the departments of public security and intelligence, the departments of information communication and the departments of public affairs need to integrate all the efforts, coordinate and support each other on deradicalization. To this end, we suggest that governments should use the strategic communication approach which will enable them to use credible, locally

embedded organizations in messaging campaigns abroad and partners in the realm of new media and entertainment.

A special unit established in China will therefore guarantee accuracy of messages, targeting of appropriate audiences and above all effective coordination of operations at all levels. This new structure also has the potential to improve the mechanism of intelligence collecting, analyzing, applying and managing as well as enhancing international collaboration, especially in the field of cyber terrorism and cyber information security should be strengthened. Effective deradicalization in China requires coordination not only at operational level but also at the planning stage. The Counterterrorism Strategic Communication Centre will enable centralized and coordinated planning at national level. Specifically, Xinjiang's strategies for economic and social development have been developed but they would need to be aligned and centrally coordinated in terms of implementation. These strategies aim at promoting Xinjiang's economic development and bringing welfare to all the people in Xinjiang. The other macro strategy refers to national counterterrorism strategy, including designing national counterterrorism mechanisms, clearly outlining responsibility to specific units and organizations and integrating national resources to fight against terrorism. Other counterterrorism strategies such as mobilizing, supporting, advocating and educating also need to be planned at national level and implemented in order to encourage the public to participate in counterterrorism fight. Additionally, an early warning mechanism for counterterrorism is required in order to give the planners room to make plans according to China's situations.

3.2 Communication strategies for Deradicalization

As mentioned in the previous sections, communication is central in radicalization and re-radicalization. The following communication strategies are therefore suggested for effective deradicalization and counterterrorism in China.

3.3 Diverse messaging and effective story telling

In terms of implementation, relevant departments responsible for counterterrorism must have long-term, mid-term, short-term plans, clear objectives and assessment mechanisms to reach for a deradicalization effect. Ingram suggests three factors that increase the success of strategic communication.[6] The first is that the messaging should be diverse in its means and media in order to increase the degree of audience penetration. A caveat to this factor is that there is need to guarantee consistency and credibility. Secondly, all messaging should ideally fall under the umbrella of an overarching, grand narrative. In absence of such a narrative, messages may appear to be ad hoc, thereby losing strength. Third, messaging should contain simultaneous rational and identity-choice, or emotional, appeals to target audiences. In the case of China, it is proposed that the government considers approaches that combine Xinjiang modern culture and ethnic culture to increase inclusiveness in messaging. These cultural strategies are carried out to make modern culture be part of the public's lifestyle, ultimately increasing the public's capability of defending themselves against religious extreme ideology's mental intrusion.

In strategic communication, strategic narrative is an important element of counterterrorism communication. Dry fact explanations should be replaced by story-telling in counterterrorism communication, especially relating some political terminology of sensitive problems. Stories concerning counterterrorism are told in a comprehensive way, like details and plots but in a plain way. Due to the fact that residents in Xinjiang have different customs, social cultures from residents in the Mid-east of China. Guided by accurate communication and cross-cultural communication, communication content is of necessity to be combined with local cultures. According to different potential receivers, correct religious knowledge, normal social activities and national policies should be narrated vividly and cross-culturally communicated.

A discussion on strategic communication and countering violent extremism, it was underlined that 'in order to make strategic communication effective, there was need to improve the resonance of messaging, a proper and thorough understanding of local sentiments was pivotal. [7] The view is supported by Dimitriu by noting that narratives are 'a resource for political actors to construct a shared

meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of the public'. [8]Against this knowledge, narratives are viewed as more appealing than communicating facts on policies, measures and operations by the government on deradicalization and combating violent extremism.

3.4 Converting from advocacy to communication

Advocating refers to the approach where communicators use persuasive ways to appeal to the people to adopt certain positions that are believed to be solutions to perceived problems.[9] On the other hand, communicating refers to an interactive process where all the sides are involved in information communication. This kind of communication not only fits in with the communication laws in the age of Omni media, but meets the public's acceptability. In terms of China's international communication on terrorism-related problems, it is evident that there is a stereotyped understanding of China's official communication, largely in Western countries. As a result, communication on Xinjiang-related terrorism has been undermined and even erased. In the face of such barriers to effective counterterrorism communication at international level, the government needs to increase its capacity to communicate with both internal and external audiences. Critical factors in this endeavor include accuracy of information and maintaining consistency across all communication platforms. Tang suggests that on terrorism-related problems there is need for coordination between domestic communication and international communication and conform to universals of journalism and communication and media for a coordinative effect.[10]

Lack of education has been identified as one of the leading factors that contributes to the radicalization youths. Against this background, it is necessary to use communication strategies in order to attain education and religious objectives set by the government in China. In recent years, especially after the terrorist incident "7•5", some schools in South Xinjiang has become the battle field where "Three Forces" are taking in the new generation. Thus, discussions about education should be deepened, such as how to increase the effectiveness of ideological education and combine literal education with national unity, how to lay a solid foundation of "Five Identities" and "Three can't-do-without", how to integrate these essential social core values into school courses. Besides, the government should continue its education investment, especially educational support to Xinjiang to popularize education of all levels in Xinjiang and improve bilingual teaching quality and the like.

When it comes to religions, the government would need to put correct religious values into re-radicalization. Positive and correct religious elements benefiting the ordinary should be used to reveal and criticize extreme religions. The fact that religious extremism distorts traditional and classical religious doctrines, destroy established social orders and cause social disturbance must be unmasked. People's consciousness of guarding against religious extremism should be improved. Uyghurs, especially young Uyghur people should increase their patriotism and become strong fighters against extreme ideologies. [11]Thus, the government should encourage prestigious religious people and intellectuals to play a guiding or directing role in re-radicalization with a proper administration of religions.

3.5 Converting from passive response to active scheduling

Active scheduling means that the government grasps the key hours of communication, actively schedules, collects evidence and allows influential folk leaders to expound China's political stance and propositions on terrorism. In addition, denounce distorted voices from some malevolent people or countries and consolidate and positively direct the public's opinions and attitudes. Strategically, the government has a careful selection of communication content, communication channels, communication subjects to put limited resources into where maximal communication effects may reached. Ideologically, the thought of not touching on sensitive problems should be abandoned, and the government studies relevant communication themes, trying to connect Xinjiang with Mid-eastern development of China, national unity and the "Belt and Road" Initiative. Regarding communication content, taking objective facts as a basis, people's well-being of Xinjiang, Xinjiang' linkage to Mid-eastern China, neighboring countries' long-term development need a larger social base. Along with

these, the government uses public diploma and folk communication among others, in order to further all-round cultural and exchanges and build a responsible national image.

3.6 Converting from traditional media to convergence media

Terrorist organizations such as ISIS have proved to be technology savvy with their effective use of social media to communicate their goals, objectives, acts of terror and appealing to people around the world to join their cause and for them to carryout acts of terror. What this confirms is the shift from traditional media to new media. 90% of cyber terrorist activities are carried out through social networks. These platforms function as virtual firewall to protect terrorism participators and provide a possibility for them to have direct access to terrorists in order to consult their confusing points, support mutually and even launch cyber jihads.[12] Although the divide is slowly being blurred because of media convergences where traditional media are beginning publish and broadcast online, new media have far more attractive characteristics such as low barriers of entry, interactivity and the capacity for users to publish and monitor the people who have accessed their content. Strategic communication entails that the appropriate media is used to communicate with a target audience. In this sense, the Chinese government can effectively counter radicalization messages by using social media and other new media platforms.

In terms of the government's communication, it is stressed that the public's opinion upon extremism is directed. Modern media's advancement make extremism takes on in the form of Omni media. Thus, the government needs to pay increasing attention to the public opinions, on the basis of information publicizing concerning government work, improve the directive mechanism of information publicizing.[13] Meanwhile, the mechanisms of data open, policy studies, collection, evaluation and response of public opinions are also established to effectively guide the public. Professional data firms, agencies of public opinions and consult, and big data based on the internet provide reliable decision-making references for the government. Moreover, database on the public opinions, corpus for typical cases and center for intelligence early warning are set. Big data can help the government have a professional, informational and normalized system of counterterrorism laws making, re-radicalization policies making, strategy-choosing, source-control and efficiency evaluating and set up a system of intelligence exchange and prediction and evaluation.[14] (Wang and Wu 2016) In the last stage of government communication, the government should improve the system of news issuing and levels of news issuing, leveling which up with governing capacity and government image. News issuing and re-radicalization are supposed to coordinate for further development.

4. Conclusion

Radicalization by its very nature is a process that is barely noticed. The rise of new communication technologies has also made it easier for radicalization messages to transcend borders and spread faster. China has invested a lot of effort and resources to counter the spread of extremism and terrorism. While these initiatives have reduced the incidents of terror attacks, there is a glaring lack of coordination and synchronization of messages among the various players. Terrorist groups have demonstrated the power of communication in radicalization and equally the government in China would need to prioritize communication in deradicalization and counterterrorism. Deradicalization is a complex process where different departments need work together, hence strategic communication is advanced as an alternative approach. A strategic communication approach, on the other hand, demands a systematic analysis of all the parts of counterterrorism communication before and defining a comprehensive, rigorous and scientific roadmap and timetable from an overall point of view to maximize the communication effects. China and other countries can exploit these strengths of strategic communication to effectively respond to radicalization and extremism.

Acknowledgements

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