

The myths of negotiating dark networks

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Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones (2008) take a critical view of the emergent paradigm of “dark networks” within international relations, which emphasizes the threats to international security from global networks of terrorism, drug and nuclear materials smuggling, and insurgency. They reject the “prevailing pessimism about the ability of states to combat illicit networks” as premature (2008: 8) and argue that a closer inspection of the idea of “networks” is required to understand their true implications.

The authors contend that clandestine networks in the international system are susceptible to a variety of weaknesses that distinguish them from legal networks. They clarify that “in contrast to hierarchies, networks lack top-down command and authoritative dispute settlement” (2008: 11). While they acknowledge the commonly cited advantages of networked actors – efficient communication and information processing, scalability, adaptability, resilience, and learning capacity – they rightfully caution that all of these may not apply to every type of network. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones identify three kinds of networks: the chain network, the wheel network, and the all-channel network. Illicit networks are primarily of the first two variants and many, if not most, suffer from “inefficiencies and short life-cycles” (2008: 17). The scholarship on networks, they claim, pays scant attention to historical evidence and extant studies of terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime.

Dark networks suffer from information limitations and communication failures, poor decision-making and excessive risk-taking, restrictions on scope and structural adaptability, collective action problems due to (lack of)

coordination, frequent security breaches, and learning disabilities (2008: 19-33). Using these limitations as an analytical framework, Eistrup-Sangiovanni and Jones examine the organizational structure of the al-Qaida, which appears to be a robust network-based threat in the 21st century. The al-Qaida's potency draws a lot from a hierarchical organization, which has been increasingly difficult to maintain as the group comes under sustained international pressure. Its capacity to undertake major operations - like the "9/11" attacks - dwindles as it more closely resembles a loosely structured network of actors; indeed, there have been more foiled attempts than successful attacks since 2001 (2008: 35-40).

Two important implications arise here: hierarchy remains important in illicit organizations, without which they do not retain potency over the long-term; and, a network structure in illicit groups may reduce threats emanating from them and a closer scrutiny of networks may help states devise counteractive strategies. While the first point is entirely acceptable, the second requires further research and empirical validation.

In essence, the approach used by the authors is an eclectic clubbing of diverse social scientific perspectives on networks, without any clear methodological focus. Moreover, why there should be any necessary distinction between hierarchy and networks remains unclear; the two may, in fact, appear at once. In addition, the historical evidence provided in the analysis occurred within particular social, political, cultural, economic (and even geographical) contexts; it is difficult to take such disparate cases and weave a general pattern. Given the state of affairs in present-day Pakistan, it becomes difficult to accept some of the core claims of the article. How

strategies of counterterrorism can evolve through this particular assessment of networks goes unexplored; in any case, terrorism persists unabated. Even so, the authors' analysis offers a refreshing perspective in understanding international organized crime.

Reference

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M. & Jones, C. (2008) ' Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why al-Qaida May Be Less Threatening Than Many Think.' *International Security*, 33, 2: 7-44.