Creating Policy for the Unknown

Not many people can wrap their head around conceptualizing anti-terror policy. All four articles approached the issue in a unique way—focusing on some things more than others. There was an agreement among the authors that cost-benefit analysis is beneficial when creating anti-terror policy, however, some articles focused more on the direct and indirect effects of the randomized, unpredictable terrorists attack. The degree that authors delved into “what if’s” generally varied due to the evidence and data they were using to support their argument. Some articles rely solely on general conditions with specific attacks in mind, while other articles think in more specific conditions but to more general attacks. All agree on the fact that no matter which way you look at it, it’s based on unknown which makes it difficult to agree where the money should be going to in terms of what to protect and how heavily to protect it for the best results.

In “Assessing Measures Designed to Protect the Homeland,” John Mueller concludes that since terrorism is so rare and unpredictable protection measures aren’t worth the costs in the way that we currently implement counterterrorism. Warren Eller and Brian Gerber assess the analysis of Mueller in “Contemplating the Role of Precision and Rage in Homeland Security Policy Analysis” finding that effective policy is developed through more than what Mueller is offering in his “short series of necessary conditions” (Eller & Gerber, 36). I will present the points of contention between Eller and Gerber with Mueller in that Eller and Gerber believe the discussion is about events that are low probability/high consequence, while Mueller believes the current protection expenditures are focused not on high-consequence events but rather on low-consequence ones. A “high-consequence” event
in the view of Eller and Gerber would be a disaster or a catastrophe, which have great impact. This differentiation is imperative in understanding their arguments and solutions. “The Effectiveness of Antiterrorism Policies” by Walter Enders and Todd Sandler evaluates six anti-terror policies in relation to substitution and complements that effect attack modes concluding that no matter what policies are put in place, the government must calculate the impact of the active/passive responses. “A risk and cost-benefit assessment of United States aviation security measures” by Mark G. Stewart and John Mueller relies heavily on the 9/11 attacks and airport security. There are points of similarity and contention among the articles that use different types of data to support their evidence.

Mueller presents the preconditions that are necessary to consider when making anti-terror policy. Some of them include: the probability of knowing what target will be attacked is small because they the terrorist can easily change their mind, thus, protection measures make a .1% chance of being attacked even closer to 0%; you can’t protect everything so some places are less safe than others; differentiating vulnerable targets (meaning they’re easily damageable) vs. invulnerable targets (meaning they’re easy and inexpensive to fix). In order to support his claims he uses interviews with officials, statistics and studies. His data is also reliant on a lot of information complied from the 9/11 attacks.

Similarly in terms of a set of conditions, “A risk and cost-benefit assessment of United States aviation security measures” by Mark G. Stewart and John Mueller uses a familiar cost-benefit analysis to focus on security measure and effectiveness of aviation, or air marshal programs. It presents Transportation Security Administration’s 20 Layers of Security that provide dense protection to travelers. Fourteen are “pre-boarding security”
which includes “deterrence and apprehension of terrorists prior to boarding aircraft” (Steward & Mueller, 148). The article is concerned with the costs and benefits of measures that seek to prevent exact duplications of 9/11, and not air mishaps like blowing up a plane or trying to shoot it down. However, as we learned in Mueller’s first article, air marshals “chief goal, and just about their only one, is to prevent a replication of 9/11, a problem that, as indicated does not seem to actually exist” (Mueller, 16). The difference between this article and Mueller’s though, is that the conditions are to a specific attack—aviation rather than attacks in general.

Mueller presents the implications that come from the preconditions he stated. He essentially asks, since it’s all so unlikely and there are too many variables, is it worth spending money on protection? Most of his implications rely on the fact that “the process of target identification can quickly become one of imaginative, and even obsessive, worst-case scenario thinking” (Mueller, 7). In my opinion, on one hand we are so lucky to live in a country where the death of nearly 3,000 US citizens in the 9/11 attacks is mourned by the country of 300 million but on the other hand, that feeling is dangerous because it leads to false assumptions and more deep-seeded fear about something that’ll never happen again. However, the interconnectedness makes us believe that it could happen to us, which leads to overcompensation of policy and protection measures that truly play no real role except make us feel better. This leads to his conclusion that in order to reduce the cost of the protection measures, there should be a reduction to only the ones that can be seen because “the reduction of even baseless fear is a social good” (Mueller, 17). I believe Eller and Gerber’s argument draws upon Mueller’s in a more concrete way—providing solutions rather than mere preconditions.
Eller and Gerber think that Mueller contradicts himself by concluding in the end that some terrorist targets might be justifiably protected. They feel as if Mueller simply points out that there is a lot that we do not know. Their point of contention with Mueller’s article is his “shaky proposition that terrorist incidents in the US are so close to a zero probability that there is not much that can—nor should—be done about it in most instances” (Eller & Gerber, 25). They believe that he is wrong to not touch upon the possibility of terrorism in relation to an all-hazards emergency management approach—there are both positive and negative externalities for an all-hazard emergency management but Mueller focuses too closely on the negative indirect consequences like, for example, the increased number of automobile deaths in the wake of 9/11.

Mueller at the forefront says that he is only talking in terms of protection measures and not policing, mitigation or resistance. However, Eller and Gerber disagree stating that, “figuring out ways to overcome barriers to catastrophic incident preparedness and mitigation is critical” (Eller & Gerber, 37). It making a cost-benefit analysis, you can’t separate those measures. We shouldn’t wait for terrorist attacks to happen and make no real attempt to subside potential attacks since the slight chance that it does happen will require a national response. Policy scholars need to do the work of improving theory and analytic tools to differentiate an “intentional” hazard from other types of hazards, discover how that affects probabilities for target vulnerability, and produce better methods of how opportunity costs can be accurately measured in order to help rationalize policy choice in regards to counterterrorism.

“The Effectiveness of Antiterrorism Policies: A Vector-Autoregression-Intervention Analysis” by Walter Enders and Todd Sandler takes a different type of
approach to find substitutes and complements among the attack modes by using vector autoregression (VAR) techniques to identify the interrelationships among the time series for different types of terrorist attacks. The interrelationships they found were ignored in previous studies like Mueller focusing primarily on 9/11 and Stewart & Mueller focusing primarily on aviation security. The other broad idea of their article is to use the data in order to investigate the short-term and long-term impact of alternative policies on terrorist plans and activity levels when the interrelationships between various modes are taken into account. Ender and Sandler give the example of the impact of policy on attack modes stating, “if, for example, the installation of metal detectors permanently reduces skyjackings but encourages other kinds of hostage-taking missions, then the true net benefits of metal detectors must account for both effects and any other indirect impacts” (Ender & Sandler, 830). Again, the measures cannot be thought of as separate entities.

By using choice-theoretical considerations, Enders and Sandler point out that a resource constraint limits the terrorist group’s expenditures on activities not to exceed its income or resources and the expenditures consists of the product of the activity’s per-unit price. Terrorists use the installation of metal detectors, which increases the per-unit price of skyjackings when compared with assassinations or other types of hostage incidents—these are the types of considerations that weren’t taken into account by the previous articles. The per-unit price that they describe is similar to Mueller’s claim that terrorists can just pick another target if they feel that the planned target will not work. Enders and Sandler claimed similarly that if the authorities concentrate efforts on thwarting a single terrorist tactic through increased security, the terrorist would substitute into other tactics (Enders & Sandler, 831). In order to support their hypothesis, quarterly data from 1968 to
1988 are used to study the chronologies of transnational terrorist incidents. This data was more encompassing of terrorist attacks across the board rather than merely 9/11 or any information from a singular attack.

The data in Ender and Sandler’s article is different than the other articles. The other articles relied heavily on interviews, studies and statistics, whereas this article used the VAR model broken down into chronologies that record the type of event, date, location, and the victims’ or targets’ characteristics. The data was then used to reach the conclusion that, “governments must be able to calculate the impact of alternative passive and active responses” (Enders & Sandler, 842). Whereas Mueller only deals with passive defense such as posting security guards, screening people entering an area, and installing security cameras. From the data, two main policy insights are concluded. One, the unintended consequences of an antiterrorism policy may be far more costly than intended consequences. This is because the latter rarely happens, yet the former is only slight considered and weighed. Second, “piecemeal policy, in which a single attack mode is considered when designed antiterrorism action, is inadequate” (Ender & Sandler, 843). In contrast to Mueller’s assumption that it may be beneficial to make a smaller list of potential targets, Ender and Sandler believe that you can’t narrow your focus on certain targets because they’re all interconnected.

Desirably, the article has a more concise focus more than preconditions or just the 20 Layers of Security by taking it one step further, like Eller and Gerber think is necessary, by presenting specific cost-analysis data of hardening cockpit doors and adding Federal Air Marshal Service. It concludes that hardening cockpit doors could be a cost-effective security measure, whereas the Federal Air Marshal Service fails a cost-benefit
analysis. The conclusion was supported by a similar test of those factors in Australia where the outcome was the same. The conclusions drawn by the cost-benefit analysis and charts (pages 155 & 156) indicate a need to save the $900 million expenditure per year for the Federal Air Marshal Service while keeping in place the $40 million per year we spend on the cockpit doors. These numbers are important in persuading policy, which is important because it gives an already very hypothetical situation a little more support.

The articles all have a desire to calculate in one way or another how to protection the nation against the unpredictable acts of terrorism in the most cost effective way. The reason why there is so much contradicting claims is because it’s all-hypothetical. The most effective way to prove whichever point you’re making is backing up with concrete evidence, in my opinion of numbers or statistics. The opinions of former CIA agents or interviews with multiple officials may put people’s minds at ease but doesn’t fix the problem of effective policy or use of appropriate resources. I think it is important to take into account the fact that there is a near 0% chance of another happening like 9/11 again, only so we can use the resources that go towards deterring 9/11 exact replications to what we know—no matter how hypothetical it is. That being said, the focus should be not on general conditions or theoretical cases but on expert knowledge on assessments of specific vulnerable targets. A step away from general conditions for a specific attack from the past towards specific conditions pertaining to well thought-out targets will result in the most cost effective protection measures because it methodically thinks through what we know with concrete numbers and facts as supporting evidence.