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Terrorism, national security and the dilemmas of regional engagement

Carl Ungerer

Religiously motivated mass casualty terrorism conducted by shadowy networks on the fringes of international society is not the only threat to Australian security interests. But it is currently the most important. And for two main reasons it is likely to remain at the forefront of foreign and security policy considerations for a generation or more.

First, the shift in US grand strategy towards coalition military operations to defeat terrorist groups in central Asia and the Middle East is likely to continue regardless of future changes in political leadership in the White House. Notwithstanding serious policy differences over the handling of the conflict in Iraq, both Democrats and Republican leaders in the United States have acknowledged that fighting the al-Qaeda network and its various regional franchises will require a decades-long commitment across several continents. Indeed, the publication of the declassified April 2006 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on trends in global terrorism made it clear that far from being defeated, the US intelligence community believes that al-Qaeda has managed to consolidate and improve its overall position throughout the Muslim world. According to the NIE, four key factors are fuelling the global jihadist movement:

1. entrenched grievances and a sense of powerlessness
2. Iraqi jihad
3. slow pace of economic, political and social reforms in many Muslim majority nations
4. pervasive anti-US sentiment among most Muslims.

Moreover, in its 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS), the US Government acknowledged that the 'War on Terror' will be 'both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas'. The NSS identified a series of short-term military options to deny, defeat and deter terrorist activity, as well as the longer term diplomatic goal of winning the ideological struggle against radical Islamism. Such statements indicate the extent to which foreign and security policy considerations have become intertwined with global counter-terrorism efforts.

As a principal ally of the United States, Australia cannot be insulated from the diplomatic and military actions taken by Washington. And although the government in Canberra will need to choose carefully how and when Australia intervenes alongside the United States in the global 'War on Terror', no political leader can ignore the imperative to fight international terrorism across multiple geographic and political boundaries. In the words of one British police commander, 'the struggle will be long and wide and deep'.

The second aspect of the 'long war' for Australia is the proximity of the threat from Southeast Asian terrorist groups. Although previous Australian governments were broadly aware of a 'patchwork' of radical Islamist organisations operating in Indonesia and the Philippines before 9/11, the general consensus among Australian officials was that such groups were domestically focused and did not constitute a regional security threat. The first Bali bombings in October 2002 ended that assessment overnight. The subsequent bombings of the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta (2003), the Australian Embassy in Jakarta (2004) and then Bali again in 2005

highlighted the extent of the threat, particularly from the terrorist group known as Jemaah Islamiyah (the Islamic Community).

Confronting radical jihadists in Southeast Asia creates an acute dilemma for Australian decision makers. For more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, comprehensive engagement with the countries of Southeast Asia was a major plank of our foreign policy orthodoxy. But divisions have emerged over the direction and pace of regional engagement strategies. Improving Australia's security outlook will require a careful and well-resourced campaign to build deeper linkages between intelligence, police and security services. It will also require a stronger commitment to counter-radicalisation strategies, both at home and abroad.

It is fair to say that Islam remains unfamiliar turf for most Australians. Despite being neighbours to the world's largest Muslim country, engaging with the region's political and religious cultures has never been an easy or automatic reflex for Australia. The regional terrorist threat adds a level of complexity to Australia's regional engagement anxieties. Pursuing a strategy of comprehensive engagement, as well as a robust set of specific policies to counter the threat of terrorism, is likely to place even greater strain on Australian foreign and security policy practitioners. But finding and striking the right balance will be vital to Australia's long-term national security interests.

Exploiting al-Qaeda's weaknesses

Lydia Khalil

Observers of al-Qaeda are often faced with dire assessments that the jihadist movement is as strong as ever. Countless analyses by intelligence agencies the world over identify al-Qaeda as robust, and reconstituted despite the countless amounts of blood and treasure expended since 9/11. Assertions like these have been repeated so often, that it is almost taken for granted that al-Qaeda will remain a hovering threat for decades to come. But it is worth challenging the common wisdom—if for nothing else than to better tailor our strategies to defeat it.

Is al-Qaeda really as robust as we think? Recent worldwide trends suggest otherwise. Having alienated Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq and experiencing a backlash against its strategy of fomenting sectarian strife, al-Qaeda is on the ropes in the land of the two rivers. Saudi Arabia has turned against Osama bin Laden after a spate of al-Qaeda attacks targeting the kingdom. An unprecedented survey by 'Terror Free Tomorrow' reveals that Saudis now overwhelmingly reject terrorism, whether at home or abroad.

Innovative rehabilitation programs in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Malaysia have helped deplete the ranks of violent extremists. After years assuming that Pakistani extremist groups held the most sway, the recent parliamentary elections in Pakistan ushered in moderate political parties—particularly groups like the Awani National Party (ANP) in the Northwest Frontier Province, a stronghold of Pashtun militants and a destination for foreign fighters. 2006 and 2007 were the first years since 2002 where Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has been unable to perpetrate an attack.

Al-Qaeda is also susceptible to the same organisational vulnerabilities as any other outfit. Whether it reverts back to a top-down bureaucratic structure, adopts the strategy of 'leaderless jihad' advocated by Abu Musab a Suri, or relies on regional affiliates, al-Qaeda's organisational models remain vulnerable to exploitation. The Australian policy community should be asking—How is al-Qaeda organised and aligned in the Asia Pacific? Just how vulnerable is al-Qaeda in the region and in what ways?

Al-Qaeda attempts to graft itself onto regional conflicts- as it has tried in Lebanon, Iraq, the Maghreb, Somalia, and Indonesia, among other places. But in most every case, al-Qaeda overreaches and gets into trouble whenever it tries to impose its leadership over indigenous insurgents. All politics is local and regional affiliates of al-Qaeda are almost always more concerned about conditions in their own locale and parochial goals rather than the grandiose world wide aims of al-Qaeda Central.

Al-Qaeda has experienced this dynamic with its main regional partner, Jemaah Islamiyah. JI analysts have pointed out factional rifts between the pro-al-Qaeda camp and the neo-Darul school over tactics. Unless we work with regional partners to widen these rifts further, this knowledge is of no use.

There is a fatal flaw in al-Qaeda's ideology and message. It is an organisation that only stands against. It offers no positive message and is vulnerable to accusations of callousness and cruelty towards civilians. This is a serious PR problem for an organisation with a previously stellar PR record. Bin Laden's deputy Ayman Zawahiri expended most of his latest discourse trying to refute it. But Western governments are tepid in their ideological response to al-Qaeda, believing they don't have the

moral authority to refute Islamic arguments. Al-Qaeda may use the language of Islam but it is no way a legitimate Islamic organisation.

Al-Qaeda is still a dangerous and ever evolving movement. The proliferation of European cells with direct links to Pakistan, the ease with which radical Islamist ideology spreads over the internet and al-Qaeda's sophisticated propaganda machine are all deeply troubling. Instability and poverty in the parts of the Muslim world remain fertile grounds for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda retains a presence in the Sahel region, the Horn of Africa, and, most critically, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan– Pakistan border where they have reconstituted their organisation and efforts.

While we must never underestimate the enemy, we should be more attuned to its weaknesses in order to formulate better strategies to defeat it. Battling 'the long war' will require a long view. Part of that long view is honing in on al-Qaeda's weaknesses, exploiting the fault lines between al-Qaeda's aims and those of its regional affiliates and challenging its ideology. In the Asia–Pacific region, Australia has a large role to play in working with its neighbours to exploit al-Qaeda's weaknesses. And Canberra remains responsible for deterring domestic radicalisation inclusively and without prejudice.

Time to end the 'War'

Nick Bisley

For Australian security policy makers the 'War on Terror' is nearly six years old. And although there have been some achievements, policy makers are grappling with a series of complex challenges. First, as Ungerer rightly points out, mass casualty terrorism is going to be top of the security priority list for some time. Yet how to deal with this problem while coping with the host of other threats, both new and old, continues to trouble decision-makers and analysts. Second, a number of key security policies have clearly exacerbated this threat, most obviously Australia's high profile participation in the Iraq intervention. Third, it is not at all clear what strategic steps should be taken to deal effectively with this longer run problem given the scarce bureaucratic resources available and the wide array of security challenges Australia faces.

The simple pieties of both hawks and doves—the mailed fist or lashings of debt relief and foreign aid—are alone not able to bring to an end a complex and multifaceted political and strategic problem. Single step solutions—whether an independent Palestine or US bases out of the Arabian Peninsula—will have scant effect on the actions of radical Islamists. The dangerous blend of economic grievance, political frustration, religious fervour and cultural alienation which produces terrorism requires a broad ranging and transnational set of responses, and ones which are not exclusively the domain of governments.

One important move that will make security policy more effective in its efforts to reduce the threat of mass-casualty terrorism is to stop using the language of war. There are many reasons, emotional, rhetorical and ethical, why the policy response to terrorism has been tied to the language of warfare. But the time has come to end this particular war. Not only does it send bad signals about how one understands the task ahead—as many have noted wars on a mode of operation literally cannot be won—it also has high and potentially rising strategic costs.

For Australia, close association with Washington has long been thought to be worth the price. Close association with an explicitly described 'War on Terror' which is perceived by many in its immediate neighbourhood as a war on Islam is counterproductive. More directly, the language of warfare plays into the public relations hands of the terrorists. It provides them with legitimacy and credibility and assists them in both recruiting new personnel and promoting their goals. Finally, there needs to be a much better fit between the policies used to combat terrorism and the language of strategic policy, and not just for its public relations consequences. This is not a war by any reasonable definition. This is a wide-ranging effort to police international society and to starve the oxygen from those who use the fissures of that society to advance unacceptable goals.

At times, hard-nosed military action is needed, at others a much lighter policy touch is required to deal with this protean phenomenon. For Australian policy makers trying to advance our security interests in the region dealing with the terrorist threat means bilateral and multilateral cooperation, especially by intelligence, policing and defence forces. By ditching the language of war and adopting a nomenclature which reflects better the strategic character of the threat, this complex task will be made a little bit easier.

Terrorism's strategic ambiguity

Rory Medcalf

Carl Ungerer's piece is a timely reminder that terrorism remains a threat to Australian nationals and interests, that the US will retain a fixation on terrorism, that we face an inter-generational contest (including of ideas), and that the Southeast Asian dimension adds diplomatic complexity for Canberrra.

But there is one other issue that I think merits more focus in explaining the place of terrorism in Australia's security outlook: how should we prioritise this threat against others (such as the coercive potential of some foreign militaries) and how should this influence the resource allocation decisions?

Some of the country's key security thinkers and practitioners debate whether terrorism constitutes a 'strategic' threat and, accordingly, what priority it should hold as a factor driving our security posture. My view is that terrorism is not a strategic threat in the sense that it can wrest territory, subvert sovereignty or compel fundamental changes in the country's external orientation or way of life. Yes, it can cause horrific loss of life. But terrorism has powerful effects on national policy directions only if a society and a government allow it to.

Enter the idea of national resilience. Australia should take its cue from the British model of counter-terrorism, not the American one. The UK approach has consolidated around a campaign to moderate public fear, put all emergencies in perspective, and deal proportionately with terrorism as one of a number of transnational threats (pandemic flu is another) that are far more likely to disrupt social order than destroy it.

In thus downplaying terrorism as a 'strategic' threat, I don't deny that there is a role for armed force—potentially military as well as police—in tackling it. In particular, there will be times, and the campaign in Afghanistan is one, when conventional militaries (using sometimes unconventional tactics) are needed to stabilise lawless zones where international terrorist groups might find sanctuary.

The strategic-or-not debate about the nature of terrorism can be a false dichotomy if it is waged to determine how much terrorism should matter in gauging what military capabilities a country needs. In Australia's emerging debates over a national security strategy and a defence white paper, the relevant point should be that terrorism is an immediate and persistent threat to Australians, rather than whether or not it can or needs to be defined as the most important one. This immediacy and persistence are reasons enough to rate counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and stabilisation missions for the ADF as highly likely in the decades ahead, and allocate resources accordingly.

The next shock

Daniel Flitton

Where terrorism has its deadliest impact on a society is when it comes as a shock. September 11, 2001 was an audacious attack—for most people in the community, a horror previously unimagined. The 2002 Bali bombing dispelled widespread assumptions about the moderate character of Indonesian Islam. And the 'home-grown' attacks of July 2005 in London similarly challenged public confidence that a British born Muslim would turn upon their own.

This leaves national security officials in a race to imagine the next shift in security threat, within comfortable bureaucratic structures that often fail to match the creativity of harried terrorist networks.

But what happens if, over an extended period of time, terrorists fail to deliver society a shock? Do people become complacent, and as a result, begin to question the cost and inconvenience of so-called protective measures? And could public complacency, in turn, give terrorists an opportunity to strike?

It has been a boom time for the national security industry over the past few years. Australia's spending in the area is estimated by ASPI to top $1 billion annually. But this money has flowed during an extended run of economic expansion. Now, with widespread worry about an economic downturn, the government will no doubt look to make cuts and find new efficiencies. Circular arguments about the need to be ever watchful cannot be allowed to replace an honest risk assessment. A debate is already brewing about the relative threat terrorism poses as compared with traditional strategic concerns (nuclear weapons proliferation for instance).

The security measures at the Sydney APEC summit last September gave a dramatic illustration of the potential for over-reaction—the central business district of Australia's largest city, locked down and flooded with police. Clearly, any gathering of world leaders needs heavy protection and not only from potential terrorist attacks. But the operation did not appear to match the threat, at least because authorities made little effort after the event to publicly explain why such measures were needed. People (read taxpayers) will quickly lose faith with apparently self-serving claims to 'confidentiality'.

Beyond the dollars spent, there are wider costs associated with the reaction to terrorism. Understanding the region becomes more difficult if viewed principally through the prism of Islamist terrorism. In the reverse, the perception of Australia as a place where Muslims are viewed with suspicion makes public diplomacy all the more difficult.

This makes an open, robust and realistic assessment of the terrorist threat all the more necessary, and a process that might help limit the shock of the next attack.

Concluding remarks for the forum

Carl Ungerer

This strategic forum addresses two of the most critical issues in the current national security debate: nearly seven years after 9/11, where does global terrorism now sit in our understanding of the threat spectrum, and how should Australia respond to terrorism in our region?

The contributors to this forum—a group of younger scholars working on a range of international strategic issues—bring a fresh approach and new thinking to these questions.

In each case, the authors have started from first principles. Is the war on terror really a war? Does terrorism represent a strategic threat? What are al-Qaeda's weaknesses, and how should we exploit them? And what is the next big shock to the international system?

The debate here raises an important issue. In the years since 9/11, the Australian Government has concentrated its national security resources on fighting terrorism. The effect has been a concentration of effort that dwarfs any other issue on the national security agenda (except perhaps defence). Once ASIO completes its current expansionary phase in 2010, one in six bureaucrats in Canberra will be working with an intelligence or national security agency.

One line of argument from these contributors is that Australia may be placing too many eggs in the one terrorism basket. I tend to agree. As I said in my opening piece, terrorism is not the only threat to Australia's security interests. And a comprehensive national security policy must be flexible and adaptive enough to respond to a range of risks and pressures in the international system.

But terrorism is still important, and no government will have the luxury of complacency when it comes to guarding against the re-emergence of a terrorist threat to Australians or Australian interests overseas.