

SDA Lunch Debate

Lessons from Mumbai: Re-evaluating European counterterrorism policies



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Programme

**Lessons of Mumbai:
Re-evaluating counterterrorism policies in Europe**

Lunch Debate – Monday, May 11, 2009

Bibliothèque Solvay, 12:45-14:30



The terrorist attack centred on Mumbai's Taj Mahal Hotel last November, a low-tech yet highly sophisticated operation, paralysed the city and defied the precautions of India's sophisticated counterterrorism unit. The attack's guerrilla warfare tactics instead of the more common Al Qaeda bombings raise questions about EU counterterrorism efforts. Should EU counterterrorism be substantially overhauled to address the threat posed by urban warfare tactics? How best can the lessons of Mumbai be incorporated into EU counterterrorism efforts? How equipped and how flexible is the EU and its member states when faced with threats of terrorism that are constantly changing and evolving?

Speakers:

Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counterterrorism Coordinator

Daniel Keohane, Senior Research Fellow, EU Institute for Security Studies

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, Senior Fellow for South Asia, International Institute for Strategic Studies

Peter Vergauwen, First Officer, SC5 Terrorism Unit, EUROPOL

Moderated by **Giles Merritt**, Director of the Security & Defence Agenda (SDA)

Lessons of Mumbai: Re-evaluating counterterrorism policies in Europe

'Is a re-evaluation of European counterterrorism necessary, or were the terrorist attacks in Mumbai last November simply a one-off?' asked Security and Defence Agenda (SDA) Director **Giles Merritt** as he opened the debate on the implications of the Mumbai terrorist attacks, held at the Bibliothèque Solvay in Brussels on May 11, 2009.

Certainly, the Mumbai attacks were "creative, innovative, audacious and yet quite simple," according to **Gilles de Kerchove**, EU Counterterrorism Coordinator. The approach used during the 50-hour siege that claimed 170 lives was a unique one, de Kerchove said, speaking at the event. "[It was] the combination of tactics in one single operation



Gilles de Kerchove

which is unprecedented ... classical guerilla warfare with 21st century tools," he added. He also drew parallels between the European Union and India, the world's most populous democracy, and argued that they face very similar challenges in reconciling freedom with security measures. To accomplish this, methods will have to be tailored. "It's quite clear

what we should do," he said. "Help this government shift from a military approach [towards counterterrorism] to a law enforcement-based strategy."

The first hurdle in that process has already been cleared, as the Pakistanis have shown, for the first time, a willingness to take advice from the Europeans on the matter. "They were eager to work with the EU," de Kerchove said of his recent trip to the region. "When my predecessor came to Pakistan two or three years ago he wasn't able to meet the key people. They would only talk to him about textile tariffs."

However, it isn't the responsibility of the European Union as a collective body to fight terrorism, de Kerchove reminded the SDA audience. National security is primarily the responsibility of individual member states with the EU constrained to a supporting role. And the best way for member states to fight terrorism is by preventing radicalisation, de Kerchove emphasised, particularly amongst young people in Europe. He also called for closer links between the intelligence community and the private sector (especially transportation and finance) to thwart attacks in the future. Although de Kerchove lauded the amount of work done in the field, he also expressed concern that not enough was being done by the EU to prevent radicalisation and terrorism in failed states like Somalia and Yemen, arguing that "that's where Al Qaida likes to resettle." He pointed towards what he saw as a trend of regional mobilisation for Al Qaida in South Asia and the Middle East and described the increasing linkages between Al Qaida and groups like the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) as meriting caution.

Turning towards EU-US cooperation on counterterrorism measures, he stressed the importance of "turning the page on

Guantanamo”, a precursor for deepened cooperation between the US and the EU. Finally, turning to the future of EU counterterrorism policies, de Kerchove emphasised the need to utilise all tools at the disposal of the EU, including organisations like Europol and Frontex.

Peter Vergauwen of Europol challenged assertions that the tactics and strategy of the Mumbai attacks were unprecedented. “I’m not all that convinced this is a shift and a new kind of attack,” he said at the roundtable. He added that the situation is far from comparable to any EU scenario. The security setting and the challenges that a densely populated city such as Mumbai faces on a day-to-day basis cannot be compared with any urban environment in the European Union. With logistics more favourable and



Peter Vergauwen

response-times much quicker, “the chances of having an urban warfare attack in Europe are rather remote,” Vergauwen said. He also explained that at least one European authority is taking

measures to deal with Mumbai-type attacks. Dialogue between the EU and NATO could do with improvement on the matter, **Daniel Keohane**, a senior fellow at the EU-ISS, said, addressing the audience of high-level policymakers, military, media

and think-tanks. He added that the EU acted like, and should be viewed as a, “counterterrorism think-tank”, helping member states assess their Security challenges. He also highlighted the importance of thinking creatively in terms of counterterrorism strategy to draw information from failed plots as well as successful ones. Additionally, the EU ought to review its non-existent image in the Muslim world to counter radical sentiment towards the West and needs a more transparent and vocal hierarchy in order to provide the bloc with a face and a clear task, Keohane argued.



Daniel Keohane

He saw bilateral dialogues initiated by the EU with key countries like India and Pakistan as being a step in the right direction, as well as the EU’s efforts to push for international legal agreements dealing with terrorism and assistance provided to third party states to develop counterterrorism resources and training programmes. He also reminded the audience that the EU’s internal counterterrorism policies were limited, since the EU as a collective entity lacks the power to spy, arrest or prosecute.

Providing an Indian perspective to the debate, **Rahul Roy-Chaudhury**, a senior fellow for South Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, pointed out that the chief reason the attack “stood out”

from the eight major terrorist attacks his country had experienced in 2008 alone was that foreign nationals were a target.

Moreover, he explained that LeT, once a narrowly-focused Kashmiri militant



Rahul Roy-Chaudhury

organisation, was moving towards an ideology of global jihad with much wider implications than just for the Indian sub-continent.

He explained that while the LeT was a banned organisation,

both in Pakistan and internationally, eradication of the LeT would be made particularly difficult because of the organisation's strong philanthropic wing, which operates hospitals and provides other charitable services in Pakistan. He saw a role for the EU in cooperating with countries in the region to prevent training and recruitment by the LeT and other similar organisations.

Coming back to the EU approach to counterterrorism, Gilles de Kerchove said that the most successful approach so far was to find "member states who have more expertise in one subject" and then get them to take the lead in that particular area. Turning to his recent trip to the Middle East, he also commented that media communication was an important aspect of counterterrorism strategy and stressed the importance of countering what he described as the "Al Qaida

narrative". Speaking about the EU's image – or lack thereof – in the Muslim world, de Kerchove said he believed that the EU "didn't sell its product very well".

Question and Answer Session

The first question of the afternoon was posed by **Edwin Bakker**, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Security and Conflict Programme at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael) who questioned whether bilateral



Edwin Bakker

or EU-wide initiatives were more important for European counterterrorism. SDA Director Giles Merritt summarised Bakker's query, asking if the EU was wrapped in red tape. Gilles de Kerchove responded that since the threat posed by terrorism was not the same for all member states, it was logical for "more directly concerned member states to work closely together." He called for greater cooperation and information-sharing through Europol and advocated learning from the experiences of US counterterrorism initiatives. He cited French-Spanish cooperation in fighting the Basque separatist group ETA as an example of successful bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism and saw a similar opportunity for cooperation with Turkey against terrorism by the PKK, a Kurdish separatist group.

Peter Vergauwen commented that the EUROPOL's legal mandate was far more restrictive than that of Interpol and thus

cooperation was somewhat more difficult. He cited “Check the Web”, a Europol tool developed under the German EU Presidency to monitor and analyse jihadi



Giles Merritt and Gilles de Kerchove

websites, as an example of a tool in combating terrorism but he thought that “very few member states seem to appreciate the real value of it.” He went on to say that while Europol – and indeed the EU in general – had the necessary tools to enact effective counterterrorism strategies, he wondered whether there might exist a “dysfunction in political will and practical ability”, with member states “unconvinced of the added value.”

Giles Merritt then asked to what extent the new Obama administration altered EU-US cooperation on counterterrorism. De Kerchove cited the Bush era as leading to certain areas of cooperation, such as EU extradition treaties, but described the Bush administration’s policies *vis à vis* the Guantanamo Bay detention facility as “spoiling [EU- US] cooperation.”

He saw Guantanamo a tricky subject for President Obama and called for the US to share more information with Europol relevant to terrorism.

Valentina Pop, a journalist from the EU Observer, furthered the discussion on Guantanamo by asking what sort of security risks would be posed to European member states in accepting

inmates from the detention facility. De Kerchove explained that while it was up to individual member states to decide whether or not to take in former Guantanamo inmates, detainees that are cleared for release should be seen as posing no risk to the host societies.



Valentina Pop

Speaking next, **Alice Reynolds** of the British government said that the prolonged and simple nature of the Mumbai attacks posed distinct challenges as compared to a bomb attack and asked what sort of implications these attacks had for counterterrorism response forces. She highlighted the linkages between organised crime and terrorism, and asked how easy it would be to access the weaponry used in the Mumbai attacks. Rahul Roy-Chaudhury described the audacity and brazenness of the attacks as surprising India; there had been past attacks by groups like LeT, but never with such a display of strength and organisational capabilities. He cited LeT’s Indian membership and linkages with other Indian-based terrorist organisations like Indian Mujahideen as facilitating such attacks and lambasted what he saw as an “appalling intelligence failure” ahead of the attacks. He saw the Indian security apparatus as being “very turf-conscious” and “not in the business of greater transparency and coordination”, and called for greater coordination both on the Indian subcontinent and internationally. Coming back to the relationship between the media and terrorism, Giles Merritt

asked if the real lesson from Mumbai was the emergence of a new breed of media-savvy terrorists who understood that a sustained siege was the best way to dominate news schedules. De Kerchove agreed that many terrorist organisations have proven to be very effective through communication technology and thought that as a response, the EU needed to develop a “counter-media tactic”. He also commented that it was not always clear to him who spoke for the EU. He believed that EU citizens “don’t care who the response comes from so long as the command structure is clear.”

Shifting to Europol’s role in counterterrorism response, Giles Merritt asked if Europol shouldn’t be more visible in the aftermath of terrorist attacks with a pan-European dimension. Peter Vergauwen saw such responses as being largely the responsibility of the member states. Returning to the question of access to weaponry needed to carry out Mumbai-style attacks, Vergauwen reminded the audience of the impact of the Balkans conflict in the early 1990s on the supply of arms in Europe. He said it was “not uncommon” in the early 1990s to see incidents in European capitals, including Brussels, involving Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers, and grenades. He warned against turning a blind eye on the unstable region today, as it could become a source for weapons in European-focused terrorist attacks.



Brooks Tigner

The next question was posed by **Brooks Tigner**, editor of Security Europe, who asked about European intelligence sharing, and whether or not it was in the Europol mandate to share information directly with third countries.

De Kerchove explained that intelligence fell outside EU competencies, and that intelligence exchanges with third parties like Russia or Turkey weren’t possible since they did not yet satisfy the desired level of data protection.

Thomas Renard, Research Fellow at the Royal Institute for International Relations (EGMONT), asked De Kerchove to what extent the AfPak region posed a threat to the EU. De Kerchove pointed to the obvious security risks caused by ongoing conflicts in the region as well as “many cases where EU youngsters go to Pakistan for training and are brainwashed” by militant ideologies.

The final question of the afternoon came from **Mark Johnson**, Director for European Markets, Sales and Marketing, Emergent BioSolutions, who asked about the risk of bioterrorism in Europe and the EU’s

position on preparedness for such attacks. De Kerchove agreed that the threat of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear attacks was very important to consider and that the creation of dirty bombs by Al Qaida was not outside the realm of possibility. He hoped



Mark Johnson

that by the end of the upcoming Swedish presidency of the EU “clever policy decisions” would be taken regarding bioterrorism preparedness.



Giles Merritt

Bringing the debate to a close, Giles Merritt described what he saw as the two main themes emanating from the discussion. The first was the changing nature to the terrorist threat,

which he saw as becoming much less evident, and much broader. The second was the implications of the financial crisis for international security, particularly with regards to terrorism. He saw immigrant communities in Europe as being the first to suffer as the economic situation worsens, and wondered about the effects of such economic hardship on radicalisation.

De Kerchove concluded by saying that while he believed substantial progress

had been made in EU counterterrorism efforts since 9/11, he saw the enactment of the Lisbon Treaty as being critical in boosting cooperation and compromise amongst member states. He saw a need for more EU external action to prevent terrorist attacks and described the solidarity clause of the Lisbon Treaty as something that would force the EU to be more efficient.

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The Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) is the only specialist Brussels-based think-tank where EU institutions, NATO, national governments, industry, specialised and international media, think tanks, academia and NGOs gather to discuss the future of European and transatlantic security and defence policies in Europe and worldwide.

Building on the combined expertise and authority of those involved in our meetings, the SDA gives greater prominence to the complex questions of how EU and NATO policies can complement one another, and how transatlantic challenges such as terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction can be met.

By offering a high-level and neutral platform for debate, the SDA sets out to clarify policy positions, stimulate discussion and ensure a wider understanding of defence and security issues by the press and public opinion.

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- Monthly Roundtables and Evening debates
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