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Defending Singapore's Vital Infrastructure Against Terrorism

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Launching the book “The Fight Against Terror - Singapore's National Security Strategy,” on 27 August 2004, Dr Tony Tan, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence, described Singapore as ‘an iconic target’ for the terrorists. Despite a significant number of arrests of militants belonging to the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network, Singapore remains a prime target for terrorists. This becomes more salient especially in the context of the transnational terrorism, in which the threat has shifted from the groups to a cadre of highly motivated and resourceful individuals, who are capable of conducting terrorist campaigns on their own. Since terrorists always seek to attract attention to their cause, howsoever distorted it may appear to be, a successful strike in Singapore would get the sort of international publicity that they aspire for. In their mind, they would have attacked a well-developed, prosperous, multi-ethnic and US-allied state.

Why is Singapore Vulnerable?

Singapore is a target for the transnational terrorists because it has publicly allied itself with the West, not only on business and commercial ventures, but also on global security and strategic issues. It is vulnerable because it is an open and a cosmopolitan society, with open borders. As DPM Tony Tan noted, “they (the terrorists) are always trying. One of these days they will get through and there will be an attack in Singapore.” A terrorist attack in Singapore has the potential to inflict serious shocks on its economy and society. Singapore's economy is heavily dependent on international trade and tourism. Any disruption of trade or fall in the tourist inflow – such as what happened during the SARS outbreak in 2003 – can have catastrophic economic consequences. A terrorist attack has also the potential to tear apart the multi-racial and multi-religious foundations of Singapore's social fabric, besides causing deep and long-lasting psychological trauma and fear among the general population. This is what the terrorists want. More than the number of casualties or the extent of the damage, their objective is to break the will of the people, to create panic and fear and, in that process, to destroy Singapore's economy and to disrupt its distinctive way of life.

Securing Singapore

One key aspect of Singapore's national security strategy against terrorism is protection of its infrastructure. This is something different from defending the country against external military threats. Since independence, Singapore's defence force was trained and equipped to fight a conventional war. But today, Singapore is facing a very complex and varied security environment. The threats impact many areas, including Singapore's domestic, foreign, defence, social and economic policies. As the investigation into the JI plot revealed,

the Singapore JI cell was planning to attack a range of targets in Singapore that included government buildings and embassies of foreign governments, land transportation infrastructure, military bases, aviation and shipping. Had these plans succeeded, besides inflicting civilian casualties, they would have had devastating effects on the economy and would have undermined public confidence to a great extent.

To confront the emerging challenges involving non-conventional threats and targets, the government is adopting new policies, building new structures and developing new capabilities. The objective is to have a robust, deliberate, and sustainable national security strategy with which it would be possible to anticipate the threats and understand and manage them with appropriate responses if and when they occur. With proper implementation it would be possible to minimize Singapore's vulnerabilities, reduce the threat to a tolerable limit, and make it difficult if not impossible for the threat to materialize. It would also enable the authorities to respond effectively in a crisis, and to restore normalcy and public confidence quickly.

Visible and proactive measures to secure physical infrastructures and the conduits of Singapore's economy are important elements in the country's national security strategy. Based on the recommendations of the National Critical Infrastructure Assurance Committee, Singapore has initiated several measures to protect its critical infrastructure, key installations and prominent public places, such as: Jurong Island, Boat Quay, the Esplanade and Holland Village and its power stations and water supply networks. Security at the venues hosting high profile events is being consistently monitored. To prevent the entry of terrorist elements, the government has fortified the land, sea and air access to Singapore with strong controls to monitor and regulate the movement of goods and people.

An estimated two million people use Singapore's public transport system daily. The government has adopted extensive measures to enhance the safety and security of the system and to deal with contingencies especially in the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) network. These include the deployment of transit security personnel, disaster management drills, as well as public vigilance broadcast messages and posters. A Public Transport Security Committee reviews the security of the public transportation system, covering infrastructure such as bus exchanges, terminals, MRT stations and depots. A National Civil Aviation Security Committee oversees implementation of the various steps- checked-in baggage security, cockpit access control, access to restricted areas of the airport including the airport concourse and aircrafts and other key installations etc.- to enhance aviation security, to secure Changi Airport against terrorist attacks and prevent hijacked aircraft taking off from the airport.

Since much of Singapore's economy is dependent on sea-borne trade, the government has also undertaken measures to enhance security in its ports as well as in the waters around it, including the critical sea-lanes such as the Singapore Straits and the Straits of Malacca. Security at key maritime checkpoints – Singapore Cruise Centre, Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal - has been strengthened. Recognizing the dangers posed by illicit sea-borne cargoes, Singapore has joined the Container Security Initiative (CSI) to thwart terrorists' attempts to smuggle in men and explosives, or to use the containers as weapons of mass destruction. It has also implemented 'The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS)' to boost maritime safety and the 'International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS)' Code which is designed to help evaluate terrorist threats involving all aspects of shipping- port facilities, ships and crew.

Recently, the maritime sector has emerged as one of the most threatened security domains. This is based on the possibility of a nexus between piracy, which is endemic in the Southeast Asian waters and terrorism. There is now much apprehension that terrorists could team up with pirates to hijack a commercial vessel or a cruise-liner and deploy it as a floating bomb to destroy a busy port, causing widespread death and destruction. They may also try to sink a big ship in a choke point in the Straits of Malacca in order to disrupt sea-borne trade and commerce. With such scenarios in mind, the government of Singapore is working closely with other littoral states, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, to secure the Straits of Malacca against possible terrorist attacks. For example, along with coordinated patrols in the strait, Singapore, in consultation with the Malaysian government, is also exploring the possibility of having ‘sea marshals’ aboard merchant ships to prevent the commandeering of ships by both pirates and terrorists. Singapore has also equipped its smaller craft with transponder systems for emergency communications.

Many essential public utilities such as electricity, water supply and transportation networks run on computer-based control systems and hence are vulnerable to acts of cyber-terrorism. The government has therefore developed a capability to secure its critical IT infrastructure. In addition, Singapore has prepared itself to respond to a wide array of crisis scenarios, stemming both from conventional (such as bombings and plane hijackings) and non-conventional (such as chemical, biological and radiological substances) attacks. The readiness of crisis response teams – the Singapore Civil Defence Force, the hospitals and research laboratories etc. – is being enhanced to ensure that they can deal promptly with any emergency in order to minimize damage and restore normalcy rapidly.

As DPM Tan remarked, the fight against terrorism is not alone about having sophisticated defences against targets and efficient response management capability. “National security requires a national effort.” It is therefore necessary for everyone to understand the threat and to help build up the collective resilience to provide a united front against terror.

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