Complex Terrorist Threats: Singapore's Response

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

Recent terrorist incidents highlight the widening spectrum of potential targets and attack methods by violent extremists. The increasing complexity of threats must be met with comprehensive initiatives which emphasise combined deterrence from governments and communities.

Commentary

THE FALLOUT from the *Charlie Hebdo* incident triggered global introspection over the power of ideological narratives to drive individuals and groups to violence. Disagreements still remain over the specific role played by Islamist ideology in motivating the perpetrators of Paris shootings. There is however, tacit consensus over how the shootings demonstrate the expanding repertoire of attack methods employed and attacks that have become more complex.

Firearms, not explosives, had been the most visible element in recent plots both reported in Western Europe as seen in France and Belgium. Compared to the randomised casualties created by explosive devices, targeted killings appear to have greater propaganda value. Firearms-based attacks allow terrorists to feed their self-constructed narrative of their potency against a specific group while avoiding collateral damages against co-religionists.

Singapore confronts complex terror threats

Singapore's threat calculus is similarly becoming increasingly complex. As a cosmopolitan hub of finance and trade, the country is an attractive target for groups seeking to damage both symbolic and strategic targets. Further compounding the challenge is Singapore's maritime environment, which can allow for the execution of maritime-borne swarm attacks similar to the 2008 Mumbai attack launched by Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Fortunately, Singapore has remained free from any successful terrorist plot. Complacency looms large in a peaceful scenario and must therefore be avoided considering the wide array of attack methodologies.

Such is the logic behind the sustained campaign of Singaporean authorities for a "Whole-of-

Government" (WOG) approach to security; which is premised on proactive measures and the involvement of the community. For potential threats emanating within the country, there had been continual improvements in fostering public-private partnerships in preventing and mitigating attacks.

This can be seen in the annual iterations of exercises such as Heartbeat and Northstar, which stress-test the response capability of relevant agencies and stakeholders. On the other hand, threats from beyond Singapore's borders are premised on the same comprehensive, WOG approach with emphasis on detecting threats as early and as far away as possible.

For instance, the Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre constantly updates the National Common Operating Picture (NCOP), which is vital to attain domain awareness. The NCOP incorporates inputs from various Singapore agencies from law enforcement entities such as the Police Coast Guard; the Republic of Singapore Navy; and even non-security agencies such as the Infocomm Development Authority that looks out for cybersecurity issues.

Private entities also provide indispensable inputs to the NCOP process. In totality, this multimodal sensemaking effort combines human intelligence, technical surveillance, and geospatial methods.

Terrorist cells versus lone actors: A false dichotomy?

Part of the growing complexity is the emergence of the lone-wolf attacker. A protracted siege by a gunman would often "trend" or go viral on social media amplifying its symbolic effect, in comparison with the truncated attention of the public to a one-off bomb attack. More problematic is the spate of attacks using innocuous everyday objects. In countries with strict gun laws, knives and motor vehicles had been used to cause injury against civilian targets from countries such as China and Israel. Stabbings and vehicle run-downs foster fear among a populace that the threat can emanate from everywhere and anyone in proximity.

Nonetheless, it must be stressed that the acts of small cells or lone actor terrorists have very limited objective and material effects. The perception of threat as echoed in both traditional and social media must not overtake the reality of threats. Mounting a successful terrorist operation requires planning, logistics, and more importantly a degree of organisation for any would-be plotters. Hierarchy, up to a certain point, allows for more efficient use of resources.

As with any organisation, a terrorist group would be more effective if the actual operative mounting an attack is supported by a coterie of specialists—the bomb maker, the recce specialist, logistician, and the recruiter. Security policies should therefore take into consideration the broadening threat continuum; from lone actors, independent cells, or organised attack teams.

Instead of overtly focusing on one organisational form which can be adopted by a terrorist or terrorists, stakeholders must bear in mind the blurred and overlapping lines between these different modes. Instead of looking at terrorist plots in isolation, it is more optimal to recognise the utility of lone actors to terrorist cells, and vice-versa.

Despite the recent attention to lone actor attacks, outside of Western Europe terrorist plots appear to have swayed towards more ambitious and organised operations against maritime targets. In November 2014, the Egyptian Navy had one of its patrol vessels taken over and razed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis militants, equipped with small arms onboard commandeered fishing vessels. Over in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Coast Guard reportedly foiled an attempt at another Mumbai-style attack in January 2015, after the interception of an explosives-laden fishing vessel from Karachi.

From Whole-of-Government to Whole-of-Nation

Collaborative approaches to security are arguably the best counterpoint for the emerging complexity of terrorist threats. Collaboration in turn, can only be attained by providing adequate and relevant information to all stakeholders, most especially the public. It is important however that the threat not be overblown. Exaggerating threats can only lead to "warning fatigue" among the populace or even outright cynicism or resentment.

Therefore, it is most prudent to seize the initiative in terms of terrorism and counter-terrorism

discourse. Labels such as "lone wolves" must be downplayed to sap the terrorists the mystique and propaganda they seek. Terrorist offences must be emphasised as criminal rather than politicised acts.

Messaging should also highlight the existing systems and mechanisms to defeat potential terrorist threats from either domestic or overseas threats. The combination of government initiative and active public involvement would ultimately act as deterrent against threats terrorists—from lone actors to cells to organised attack teams.

The increasing complexity of terrorist threats is inevitable. Reactive measures to mitigate and address threats by different types of organisation and attack methods are counterproductive. Only comprehensive approaches that combine public and private stakeholders to attain situational awareness can serve as deterrent against terror.

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