

Terrorism and Small Arms and Light Weapons

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EXISTING AND EMERGING TRENDS

Worldwide terrorist incidents during the past year suggest four key trends.

- 1) Ambushes followed by bombings and assassinations remain the most common forms of terrorist attack.
- 2) Of all terrorist incidents, international terrorist attacks constitute only 8-12 per cent. If a citizen of more than one country is involved in a terrorist incident, the incident is categorised as an act of international terrorism. A vast majority of terrorist attacks – 88-92 per cent – are domestic attacks where both the perpetrator and the victim are from the same country.
- 3) The bulk of terrorist campaigns are being fought in the global south, the poorer regions of the world. The most terrorist-affected geographic region is the Asia-Pacific, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Middle East, and the former Soviet Union. Until 11 September 2001, Western Europe and North America witnessed the lowest level of terrorism.
- 4) The geography of terrorism has changed. With the Middle East peace process following the Oslo Accords, the gravity of international terrorism shifted from the Middle East to Asia. Afghanistan of the 1990s replaced the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of the 1970s and 1980s as the main centre for training several dozen terrorist groups. Although Asia is distant, the threat to the West has not diminished. With access to inexpensive travel, widespread availability of communication technologies and enhanced migration and refugee flows, the terrorist geographic reach has increased. Increasingly, terrorist groups develop transnational propaganda, finance and procurement networks as well as operational infrastructure to mount surveillance and strike targets.

TERRORIST WEAPONS

Small arms and light weapons are the main tools of terrorist violence. In terrorist

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weapons procurement and acquisition, the most discernible trends are:

First, terrorists are increasingly procuring and employing stand-off weapons. Stand-off weapons are rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs), light anti-tank weapons (LAWs), surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), and mortars. These weapons possess higher firepower compared to the standard infantry weapons such as the AK-47, T56, G3 or M16. Furthermore, the stand-off weapons enables the terrorist group to preserve its strength – to reduce its human losses and wastage – and inflict greater damage and destruction to both life and property.

Second, the expertise and technology to improvise low-cost mass-casualty explosive devices have proliferated during the past decade. These low-tech high-impact devices are difficult to detect and therefore to counter. With an expression of interest to kill more, terrorist propensity to strike high prestige as well as symbolic targets has increased.

DETECTION AND DISRUPTION

Throughout the 1990s the role of state sponsorship in providing weapons to terrorist groups declined. Largely deterred by international sanctions, governments are reluctant and hesitant to provide weapons to terrorist groups. The threat of detection and sanctions is likely to make the few pariah states even more distant from terrorist sponsorship.

The post-cold war environment has facilitated the formation and sustenance of state-of-the-art international terrorist propaganda, fund-raising, procurement and shipping networks. Terrorist propaganda and fund-raising is often conducted under the guise of funding charities, human rights and humanitarian work. The funds generated are moved through a series of feeder accounts to procurement accounts. Operating through front-cover sympathetic organisations or cells and using adapted/false end-user certificates, terrorist groups procure small arms and dual technologies. With the end of the East-West confrontation, the bulk of the small arms procurement has shifted from the Middle East and Southeast Asia to the southern belt of the former Soviet Union and to Eastern Europe as well as to countries where conflicts have ended.

Using flags of convenience, terrorist-chartered or terrorist-owned arms carriers transport weapon supplies to their theatres. These carriers are managed by terrorist front and cover companies located in the Western hemisphere and in the Far East. Some 90-95 per cent of the time, these registered carriers engage in perfectly legitimate commercial trade. More than the lack of strength or expertise, it has been the lack of political courage that has impeded States from the interdiction of arms shipments for terrorist groups. For fear of earning the wrath of a foreign terrorist group, many countries – including those in the West – have turned a blind eye to the operation of these carriers. Unless there is a direct threat, there has been reluctance on the part of many governments to act against arms destined for foreign terrorist groups.

Until the steadfast flow of weapons to conflict zones is disrupted, about 80-90 ongoing high and low intensity conflicts are likely to persist. With the flow of weapons, low intensity conflicts are likely to graduate into high intensity conflicts. Conversely, with the disruption of arms flows, high intensity conflicts are likely to decline to low intensity conflicts. With arms pipelines assuming an international character, robust local and national mechanisms are of limited use. To effectively regulate the supply of weapons to terrorist groups, bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, such as monitoring the transfer of funds, movement of procurement officers and crew, and tracking arms carriers, are paramount to control the threat.

COUNTER-MEASURES

Considering existing and emerging trends, it is paramount for operational agencies and law enforcement authorities to develop measures to detect a terrorist threat at the planning and preparation phases. The most effective weapon against terrorism is intelligence. Target hardening to physical security measures can be deterrents but are not guarantees against the current wave of terrorism. As such, the key to detection is terrorist penetration, especially in its decision-making structures using human and technical sources by national security and intelligence agencies. To checkmate terrorist sophistication – especially the use of the human courier to evade technical surveillance – governments need to develop effective agent handling programs.

While the Department for Disarmament Affairs has taken an important step forward in addressing these issues, there are areas where national governments need more work:

- 1) Generation of high-grade or high-quality intelligence to detect, interdict and disrupt terrorist procurement and shipping;
- 2) Harmonisation of legislation and improvement of judicial cooperation with a view to swiftly extraditing terrorist procurement officers, ship captains, crew and others engaged in terrorist-related procurement and shipping;
- 3) Confiscation of the assets of those who fund terrorism including terrorist procurement;
- 4) Deterrence of illicit procurement and shipping by instituting life imprisonment for ship captains, crew, procurement officers and terrorist weapons/combat trainers.

As the goal of terrorism is most often political, there are multiple approaches – both political and otherwise – towards managing the terrorist threat. At the core of terrorist procurement and terrorist operations is terrorist propaganda. Without disseminating terrorist propaganda, it is nearly impossible to recruit or raise funds. Despite the horrific events of 11 September, we are still far away from criminalizing the

production and dissemination of terrorist propaganda. It is almost impossible to disrupt terrorist recruitment, financing and procurement, without dismantling terrorist propaganda infrastructure. As the international community is unwilling to target and erode terrorist propaganda infrastructure, governments can disrupt terrorist light weapons acquisition only at the critical three phases of banking, procurement and shipping. At present some of the most respectable banks are being used by terrorist groups to transfer funds for procurement and shipping operations.

As the bulk of terrorists employ firearms or explosives, controlling their widespread availability is at the heart of reducing the scale of terrorist violence. During the next two to three decades the levels of production of light weapons by the global south is likely to exceed the levels of production in the global north. The lack of controls is likely to contribute to an increase in political and criminal violence. Similar to regulating production and supply, stemming the flow of terrorist finance, movement of weapons and ammunition as well as denying terrorists weapons training should be central to the counter-terrorist agenda. In addition to governments sharing each other's expertise and experiences, regional and international organisations must invest in far reaching diplomatic, political, economic and security efforts to assist national and multilateral initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Terrorists are adapting rapidly to the sweeping changes in the international environment. Instead of resisting globalisation, they are harnessing its forces. When under threat, terrorist support and operational infrastructure undergo displacement. Terrorists increase their resilience by moving rapidly in search of new opportunities. While operational agencies and law enforcement authorities are constrained by national jurisdictions, terrorists operate exploiting the gaps and the loopholes in the international system. In weapon procurement, transfers and training, this trend is evident. Therefore, for the fight against contemporary terrorism to be effective and enduring, state response must be multi-pronged, multi-agency, multidimensional and multinational.

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