

## **WMD Terrorism: Challenge and Response**

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We live in what has been called the “global risk society”, in which the three main sources of risk are ecological crises, financial crises and terrorism.<sup>1</sup> The last has a particularly threatening aspect when it is linked with the use of so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMD), i.e., chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. The element of interdependence in meeting the threat posed by such weapons is strong, requiring inter-state cooperation to meet the threat. The materials for these weapons (except nuclear weapons) are widely available and transportable. Present-day communication technology facilitates the diffusion of both the idea and the capability to use them. While ASEAN has taken some steps to tackle the threat, a more concerted effort would be helpful.

### **The Nature of the Challenge**

WMD include chemical weapons that utilize toxic and other chemicals; biological weapons that spread harmful diseases and infections; radiological weapons that expose victims to radiation; and nuclear weapons that produce powerful explosions as well as radiation.<sup>2</sup> Terrorists have so far not achieved significant levels of harm in numerous attempts to utilize WMD. Potentially, the effects of such weapons can be severe. For instance, 100 kilogrammes of anthrax spores air-delivered over an area of 300 square kilometres can cause between one and three million fatalities.<sup>3</sup> While this would be an extreme case requiring considerable technical expertise and financial resources, smaller levels of damage can be achieved more easily. Again, with the exception of nuclear weapons, the availability of most materials is easy and is expected to increase with industrial and technological development.<sup>4</sup> The term “WMD” is deceptive. Mass destruction requires expensive and technically sophisticated weapons. To generate lower levels of destruction is less difficult. Dangerous chemicals are widely used in industry,

harmful pathogens are available in research laboratories and germ banks, and radioactive materials are widely used in hospitals, research establishments and industry. Terrorists have already begun to employ low-technology chemical weapons by blowing up gas canisters in Iraq.

What are the potential effects of WMD terrorism? The physical effects vary, depending on the characteristics of the target area (especially density of population), weather conditions, and the type and quantity of materials used. Biological and radiological attacks do not have immediate effects but produce symptoms later. Economic effects can be severe, particularly the cost of decontamination. For instance, one US study has estimated that if a typical quantity of americium used for oil-well surveys were to be blown up with about half a kilogramme of TNT, the cost of decontamination could reach fifty billion US dollars.<sup>5</sup> Further negative effects include higher insurance costs and the slowdown or even withdrawal of investment. Psychological effects include distress responses such as fear, insomnia, impaired concentration and a range of ailments that fall under the rubric of Multiple Idiopathic Physical Symptoms (MIPS); behavioural changes such as fear of travel, increased use of tobacco and alcohol and compulsive use of medication; and psychiatric illness, notably post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder (ASD) and severe depression.<sup>6</sup> Political effects are harder to predict. Citizens may remain calm and largely inactive. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that they may panic, resort to violence and question the legitimacy of their governments.

### **ASEAN's Response**

There is certainly growing awareness of the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia, particularly after the Bali bombings of 2002. Efforts to act on terrorism have been made through a process that has been largely a top-down one, with governments taking the initiative, though think tanks and the media have played a role in communicating the issue to the public. To a considerable degree, pressure from outside the region, mainly from the United States as well as the United Nations, has brought about regional action. ASEAN's responses may be categorized under the following headings.

### ***Full ASEAN Response***

Collective action has been generated in the following ways:

- *Declarations:* These include the Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism (2001), which was followed up by additional declarations in 2002 and 2003, and are complemented by declarations on the related subject of trans-national crime, which have a longer history.
- *Agreements:* Two major agreements are the Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement (2004) on criminal issues relating to terrorism and the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (2005). The latter does not specifically address terrorism but does treat disasters as natural as well as “human-induced”.
- *Institutionalized interaction:* This includes the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on Terrorism, the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on Transnational Crime, the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management, and the long-standing ASEAN Chiefs of Police Conference. In July 2007, representatives from ASEAN police forces met to discuss ways of dealing with bio-terrorism.

### ***Other Institutional Responses***

ASEAN has cooperated collectively with the United States through the Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism (2001) and, more broadly, with China via the Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Fields of Non-Traditional Security Issues (2002).

There have also been the ASEAN Plus Three Meetings on Transnational Crime, which started in 2004. This is an important development since there is a significant possibility of WMD-related materials being obtained or transported through organized crime channels.<sup>7</sup> Within ASEAN, there has been sub-regional cooperation in the form of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures (2002), which was joined by Brunei, Cambodia and Thailand in 2003. The agreement provides for intelligence sharing and combined counter-terrorism operations. Individual ASEAN members have cooperative arrangements among themselves and with others, including the United States and Australia.<sup>8</sup>

### **Limitations of the ASEAN Response**

The regional response outlined above relates largely to the terrorism threat in general. ASEAN as an institution has undertaken relatively few serious initiatives with respect to WMD terrorism. Individually, its member states are required to act under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004), which calls on all members of the UN to adopt administrative and legal measures to counter the WMD terrorism threat. So far, reports to the so-called “1540 Committee” established to monitor progress reveal, not much has been done by most ASEAN members, with the exception of Singapore.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for the slow movement are numerous. They include variations in perceptions of the threat, resource constraints, concerns over costs and resistance to the imposition of requirements through Chapter VII of the UN Charter, behind which looms the possible threat of sanctions for non-compliance. Some members of ASEAN are also uncomfortable with associating Resolution 1540 with the US-led “global war on terrorism”.

ASEAN’s limited response to terrorism issues may also reflect its history as an organization based on consensus and the acceptance of differences among its members. At present, the debate over how much farther the organization can go remains unresolved. But tight institutionalization is not a prerequisite for effective collective response. What is necessary, though, is an appreciation of the seriousness of the threat.

### **How Serious Is the Threat?**

To many, the threat of WMD terrorism seems distant and is not worth incurring the costs associated with it. Both types of costs—the cost of not taking action as well as the cost of taking action—have to be addressed in working out an appropriate response.

Not taking action has the potential to incur high human and other costs of the kind outlined above. Even if terrorists do not inflict “mass” destruction, these costs can be considerable. The potential for such costs to actually arise depends on some sort of strategic warning, that is, on an assessment of indicators of the probability that WMD events will occur. There are certainly arguments against the anticipation of a WMD threat. It could be argued that terrorist activity in Southeast Asia, while not under control, has been contained; that its external links to Al-Qaeda, a major source of interest in WMD, have been largely cut; and that the major regional terrorist groups are on the

defensive. But the case is not convincing. Groups that are on the defensive may become more desperate, as in the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which resorted under pressure to the use of chemical weapons in Sri Lanka in 1990.<sup>10</sup> The revival of intense terrorist activity with trans-national links cannot be ruled out. Besides, external inspiration and practical instructions on making WMD can reach the region easily via the Internet.<sup>11</sup> The London car bomb plots of June 2007 were planned through Internet chats.<sup>12</sup> Kafeel Ahmed, who was involved in the near-simultaneous suicide attack on Glasgow airport, had downloaded hundreds of bomb designs from the Internet, which enabled him to design and put together makeshift chemical weapons.<sup>13</sup> While many terrorist groups may not be inclined to opt for WMD, there has certainly been interest in doing so among some well-known terrorist figures, such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab Al Suri and Dhiren Barot.<sup>14</sup> Most significantly, the WMD threshold has already been crossed by terrorists. In several instances, gas cylinders have been blown up by terrorists in Iraq in 2007.<sup>15</sup> The London car bomb plot involved the use of gas along with other materials.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the WMD terrorism threat is real, not far-fetched.

On the other side, the costs related to taking action need not be excessive. Some recommendations are made in the next section.

### **Towards an Optimal Response**

The response to the WMD terrorism threat does not necessarily require costly and difficult organizational expense and effort. In practice, it would be more useful to opt for a relatively decentralized response. Terrorist organizations are themselves increasingly decentralized. Combating them by means of decentralized networks can be effective as local officials know their ways of functioning best.<sup>17</sup> The principal components of such an approach would be as follows.

First, there is a need to create greater awareness among officials at all levels that their roles are crucial. This involves the cultivation of a diffused and well-embedded security culture. Second, it is important to ensure that information is exchanged among the numerous organizations concerned with countering terrorism at the intra-state and inter-state levels. Third, the focus should be on flexible systems (ad hoc groups under an institutional umbrella) that coordinate and adapt to new situations quickly rather than on

building strong centralized organizations, which are difficult to create and become slow-moving once they are set up.<sup>18</sup>

On a practical note, ASEAN can set up a working institutional arrangement to discuss and resolve issues of common concern and to provide assistance to states that require technical and legal assistance. This can be similar to the ad hoc working group established at the Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter-Terrorism in February 2004. The group can share experiences, formulate models for best practices, develop a database on legislative and administrative measures, and facilitate more effective intelligence exchanges. It would be useful to have a continuous arrangement for the exchange of WMD-related information. Notification of inter-state movement of material, accidents and cases of “orphaned” material as well as intelligence on criminal and/or terrorist activity relating to such material can be shared.

Another area of importance is the role of the research and development, medical and industrial sectors, all of which possess WMD-related materials. These are often inadequately secured. Apart from imposing legislative and administrative requirements, governments should involve them in building awareness of risks, threats and preventive measures and in the creation of a security culture among them. The joint disaster management mechanism seems to be focused mainly on natural crises such as tsunamis, earthquakes and floods. Within its framework, more attention can be given to the task of responding to acts of WMD terrorism, which requires some additional planning, training and equipment.

None of these initiatives involves high costs. Nevertheless, some of these costs can be met under the arrangements made for the implementation of Resolution 1540, which envisages multilateral assistance. Overall, a regional response can optimize counter-terrorism efforts and obviate the need for excessive dependence on external powers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, “The Silence of Word: On Terror and War”, *Security Dialogue* 34, no. 3 (September 2003), pp. 255–267.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Cornish, *The CBRN System: Assessing the Threat of Terrorist Use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Weapons in the United Kingdom* (London: Chatham House, February 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Intriligator and Abdullah Toukan, "Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction", in Peter Katona, Michael D. Intriligator and John P. Sullivan (eds.), *Countering Terrorism and WMD: Creating A Global Counter-terrorism Network* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 72, Table 4.1A.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 76, Table 4.3.

<sup>5</sup> Federation of American Scientists, "Dirty Bombs: Response to A Threat", *Public Interest Report* 55, no. 2 (March/April 2002), pp. 2, 6–10. For a similar study on London, see "What If A Dirty Bomb Hit London?" *BBC News*, 30 January 2003, available at < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2708635.stm>>(accessed 31 July 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Igor Khripunov, "The Social and Psychological Impact of Radiological Terrorism", *Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 2 (July 2006), pp. 294–300.

<sup>7</sup> On the crime-terrorism nexus, see John T. Picarelli, "The Turbulent Nexus of Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism: A Theory of Malevolent International Relations", *Global Crime* 7, no. 1 (February 2006), pp. 1–24.

<sup>8</sup> David Martin Jones and Michael L. R. Smith, "Making Process, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order", *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 170–174.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Crail, "Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1540: A Risk-Based Approach", *Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 2 (July 2006), pp. 355–399, see especially Figure 1, pp. 374–375, and Figure 2, pp. 380–381.

<sup>10</sup> John Parachini, "Putting WMD Terrorism into Perspective", *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 39–40.

<sup>11</sup> Sammy Salama and Lydia Hansell, "Does Intent Equal Capability? Al-Qaeda and Weapons of Mass Destruction", *Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 3 (November 2005), pp. 615–653.

<sup>12</sup> "45 Doctors Planned Terror raids in Chatroom", *Indian Express*, 6 July 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Praveen Swami, "Glimpses into the Mind of Suicide Bomber", *Hindu*, 14 July 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; Paul Cruickshank, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (2007), pp. 1–14; and Duncan Gardham, "'Gas Limos' Terrorist Planned to Murder Thousands", *Telegraph* (UK), 7 November 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Damien Cave and Ahmad Fadam, "Iraq Insurgents Employ Chlorine in Bomb Attacks", *New York Times*, 22 February 2007; Alissa J. Rubin, "Chlorine Gas Attack by Truck Bomber Kills Up to 30 in Iraq", *Washington Post*, 7 April 2007; and Joshua Partlow, "Attacks Kill 14 U.S. Soldiers in Iraq", *Washington Post*, 4 June 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Cowell, "London Finds Linked Bombs, A Qaeda Tactic", *New York Times*, 30 June 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Atran, "A Failure of Imagination (Intelligence, WMDs, and 'Virtual Jihad')", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (May 2006), pp. 285–300.

<sup>18</sup> John King, "The New Warfare and Cooperative International Security", *Foresight* 6, no. 4 (2004), pp. 212–217.