

Understanding Terrorism: 20 basic facts

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by Aldo Borgu



Suicide truck bomb at the US-led coalition headquarters, 18 January 2004. AFP/AAP/Ramzi Haidar © 2004 AFP

Terrorism is a major contemporary security problem and will remain so for the foreseeable future. But as we approach the third anniversary of the attacks of September 11 and despite the fact that modern terrorism is a phenomenon that policy makers have been dealing with for at least 40 years, the concept itself still seems little understood and much misrepresented.

A lot of that has to do with politics. Part of the problem is much of the language used when speaking of combating terrorism is naturally emotive. We speak of the cowardice of terrorists, and their murderous attacks which then requires that we fight a global war on terror

to eliminate the threat. Such language is no doubt effective politically, it might also possibly be a prerequisite to mobilise a whole-of-nation effort to combat the threat. However it doesn't help to properly understand the threat which means that it doesn't really help to effectively combat it either.

So before we seek to develop a counter-terrorism strategy there are a few simple facts we need to both acknowledge and accept. They're in no particular order, many are interconnected and most are blatantly obvious, but that doesn't mean they aren't worth restating and remembering from time to time.

1. Agreeing on a definition of terrorism is as hard as agreeing on the best strategies to combat it

This shouldn't be a surprise as the two issues are naturally linked. It comes down to that old saying "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". Ultimately, how you define who's a terrorist and what constitutes a terrorist act all comes down to the politics of the day.

Part of the problem is the US's approach to the issue and the words it uses. The US justified the invasion of Iraq last year as part of its war on terror, but fighting terrorism was more the pretext than the real reason for overthrowing Saddam.

Furthermore, by calling its campaign against Al Qaeda the "global war on terrorism" the US gives the impression that it is combating all forms of terrorism everywhere, when it is clearly not (see fact no.10). Rather the US is fighting militant Islamism, and even then only if it has an international dimension.

So the US isn't beyond behaving opportunistically in its global anti-terror campaign. Iraq was one example. Another is how it deals with other major powers. The only reason the US has defined the various Chechen groups fighting the Russians and Muslim separatists in Western China as terrorists, is the US needs the support of the Russian and Chinese governments. If we were still in the middle of the Cold War we'd be embracing the Chechens as allies and probably funding their activities. And both Russia and China have been just as opportunistic in using the US's obsession with terrorism to justify their own counter-terrorist actions.

Without wanting to further add to the disagreement and confusion surrounding competing definitions of terrorism, the simplest definition is probably as follows: the use, or threat of use, of violence primarily directed against civilians, and undertaken by non-state actors for a wider political purpose.

2. Terrorism, even in its contemporary form, is not a new phenomenon

Terrorism as we recognise it today has been a feature of international politics and security since at least the late 1960s. Jihadist or Islamist terrorism has been an issue since the early 1990s, particularly in Egypt and Algeria. Global terrorism was a factor in the 1970s and 1980s with the Soviet Union suspected of having provided some training, equipment and support for a variety of terrorist groups. Marxist European terrorists and Palestinian terrorists cooperated on a number of attacks in the 1970s.

Commissions of inquiry have been dealing with the threat of nuclear terrorism since the early 1980s while 1995 saw the most famous attempted use of chemical weapons in a terrorist attack in Tokyo's subway. Mass casualty terrorism (yielding deaths at least in the hundreds) has been around for more than twenty years. Over 300 people were killed in the attacks on US and French soldiers in Beirut in 1983, while 270 people were killed in the 1988 Lockerbie bombing. A further 225 people were killed and 5,000 injured in the Al Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Africa in 1998.

And as the threat isn't really new, that means you don't necessarily require radically new policies and approaches to deal with the threat. The real difference for Australia is that we are now on the radar screen of a number of major terrorist groups.

Terrorists copy each other, they learn from one another and they learn from their mistakes, most of the time better than we do.

3. Terrorism is a means of conflict that constantly evolves over time

While terrorism isn't necessarily new, there are many aspects of terrorism that do change over time. Leadership, structures, capabilities, tactics and goals of terrorist groups are all subject to development and modernisation. Terrorists copy each other, they learn from one another and they learn from their mistakes, most of the time better than we do.

Most importantly terrorism evolves in reaction to the counter-terrorist measures taken against it. The US attacks against Afghanistan forced Al Qaeda to become more decentralised so we shouldn't assess them on their pre-9/11 structure and organisation. It's debateable whether Al Qaeda now needs fixed foreign training bases to operate effectively. Nor should we judge their possible future actions primarily on the basis of their past tactics. And we still don't really know to what degree Al Qaeda anticipated the US response to the attacks of 11 September and planned accordingly. We need to be aware that our successes tactically while welcome, can have the effect of driving the terrorists to become more daring, innovative, desperate and resourceful. By restricting the number of attacks we may just force them to make future attacks even more lethal.

Like Al Qaeda it's possible that Jemaah Islamiah (JI) has adapted, based on the reaction of regional governments to it, probably by focusing its efforts on Indonesia and the Philippines and less on Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. But we also need to consider the possibility that JI's leaders and operatives will devolve to join other like-minded organisations in Indonesia and the wider region. Similarly it's possible that criminal organisations such as pirates may find a use for terrorists that are left without a home or group to belong to. Just as we shouldn't obsess with just Al Qaeda globally, we shouldn't fool ourselves that JI will continue to be the only or the major terrorist threat we face in the region. That will make the intelligence task of tracking such groups even more demanding.

4. Terrorism is a long-term form of conflict

Terrorism defies a quick fix. Most terrorist campaigns take place over a 20–30 year time frame to achieve their objectives. Terrorism is a strategy designed to wear down an opponent, a conflict based on attrition. This calls for a consistent and long-term policy to combat terrorism. That then calls into question whether countries like the US and Australia have the patience, will and attention-span to deal with the threat in whatever guise and for however long it takes.

How long can we expect to be able to maintain the attention and pressure of keeping terrorist groups like Al Qaeda on the defensive, to maintain the broad diplomatic cooperation required to fight terrorism effectively, not to mention the increased expenditure and security measures each country involved in the campaign requires? This will become especially relevant when the future strategic environment eventually proves itself to be less than accommodating in allowing us the luxury of being able to focus primarily on terrorism as the major security issue of the day.

Patience and perseverance are the most important qualities to retain in order to effectively combat terrorism. The aim of most terrorists is to provoke an over-reaction from the target government in order to further estrange them from the target population. Therefore that must also be our strategy, to separate the terrorist from the wider population we are trying to win over. But in this case the target population isn't our own, it's the wider Muslim population. They are the ones who will ultimately determine whether the terrorists achieve their wider strategic and political goals. The government would do well to figure out how to get the message through to them.

5. Root causes need to be addressed but doing so won't stop all acts of terrorism

Individual terrorist groups can come to an end, but the use of terrorism will not. At best terrorism can only be contained to the point where it is considered manageable. Terrorist groups can be defeated but it's just as likely that another group will step up and take their place. Spreading democracy worldwide, eradicating poverty, improving the delivery of basic services in Iraq or solving the Israel—Palestine issue will not eliminate the threat of terrorism. After all terrorists only need a hard core of supporters to undertake their acts. In the 1970s and 1980s, Italy was held ransom to the terrorist actions of groups numbering only in their low hundreds.

But that doesn't mean you can afford to ignore or down play the "root causes" of terrorism as the government's terrorism White Paper does. Addressing root causes of terrorism helps deny terrorists strategic success, that is, achieving their broad political objectives. Not least because it can act to decrease the wider popular support behind the terrorists ideology and objectives. More importantly it also acts to deny the terrorists large numbers of future recruits as well as minimising wider logistic support for the planning and conduct of their attacks.

Part of the problem is the use of the term "root causes". It suggests these issues are a direct cause of terrorism whereas the real root cause of terrorism is politics. Rather these issues are what enables terrorists to flourish and in the longer term, if not addressed, ultimately succeed in their goals.

6. Terrorists target us as much for what we do as for who we are

A popular myth being propagated by governments worldwide—and not least our own government—is that terrorists target us primarily because of our culture and what we represent, rather than for the conduct of our foreign and domestic policies. The truth is that it is actually because of both.

The government's terrorism White Paper maintains the line that terrorists attack us not for what we've done, but for what we are. That's a convenient argument for any government to make because it lets them off the hook for taking responsibility for their actions. But it's also dangerous thinking. If you really believe that, then it makes you more liable to make foreign policy decisions without consideration of the consequences. The Minister for Foreign Affairs states quite rightly that an activist foreign policy can assist to combat the threat. But by the same token it can also feed the threat.

With respect to Australia we need to start taking the terrorists at their word, and not just selectively.

There's a reason why the US is a favoured target and it's not just because of Coca-Cola, MacDonalds or Britney Spears, especially when you consider that much of American culture remains popular amongst young people in the Middle East. Rather it's US foreign policy that motivates many of their actions. As Eliot Cohen recently stated "overwhelming dominance has always invited hostility". That's also one of the reasons why moderate Muslims find it so hard to speak out in support of what the US is doing, because they primarily object to its foreign policies, not to its culture.

With respect to Australia we need to start taking the terrorists at their word, and not just selectively. If they say that our policies in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq are the reason for the attacks then there's no reason not to believe them. Unfortunately sometimes the price for doing the right thing in your foreign policy is that it makes you a bigger terrorist target.

7. Terrorism does sometimes work

A lot depends on your definition of success for the terrorist and this involves needing to separate tactical success from strategic success. Tactical success for a terrorist is a



Bali bomber Imam Samudra in his prison cell, 17 August 2004. AP via AAP/Alì Kurdi © 2004 The Associated Press

successful execution of an attack. Strategic success is more the achievement of their political goals.

Terrorism when undertaken in a limited fashion and as part of a wider political strategy can often work. Terrorism worked for the Israelis in the late 1940s to get the British to quit Palestine; it worked for the Palestinians in the 1980s in forcing the Israelis to negotiate with them; and it has worked for the IRA in a similar fashion. Terrorism can also work when it has short-term tactical aims such as may have been the case in the 2004 Madrid bombings which ultimately resulted in Spain withdrawing its troops from Iraq. The question remains, however, as to whether Al Qaeda (or JI) need to do anything more than conduct a major terrorist attack every five years or so against the US (or Australia) in order to be considered a success.

But while terrorists can enjoy tactical success we shouldn't become so alarmist to suggest that they are on the verge of achieving strategic success. The aim of the Islamist

terrorists would seem to involve the ejection of US forces and influence from the wider Middle East and the establishment of Islamic regimes in those countries. Most Middle Eastern countries have proven to be quite resilient to that aim. The Algerian Government in particular has been quite successful in combating a brutal Islamist terror campaign over 10 years that is estimated to have cost some 150,000 casualties, in part through using brutal measures itself.

Moreover Malaysia, the Philippines, India and Indonesia have all held elections recently. All have sizeable Muslim populations and a significant terrorist problem. Yet despite the fears generated by the Madrid bombings none of these countries have suffered any major terrorist attacks during those elections.

In any event if we are to focus on denying terrorists strategic success then that requires a political strategy to combat it. We can't primarily rely on the natural revulsion most people will feel towards terrorist attacks as being the ultimate defence against the terrorists achieving their objectives. Holding

the moral high ground is not an adequate counter-terrorism strategy.

History also teaches us that we shouldn't be so naive or idealistic to assume that the people we are currently trying to hunt down and eliminate won't turn out to be the sort of people we end up negotiating with in 10 years time. After all, both the US and Israeli governments have in the past negotiated with terrorists for the release or exchange of hostages and prisoners.

8. Terrorism has more sophisticated aims than just killing people

We need to recognise that groups like Al Qaeda may have more strategic thinking behind their objectives than we seem to give them credit for. We can't always assume that violence has become an end in itself. The recent Madrid bombings and attempts to divide the US-led coalition may prove to be evidence of this possibility. Terrorism is all about political power. Terrorism is a tactic, a means to achieve political power.

For that reason it can't be assumed that radical Islamists will only use terrorism to achieve their strategic objectives in the future. It's not entirely clear whether the US and Australian governments have considered the possibility and implications of groups like Al Qaeda developing political wings. After all terrorism is best effective when used in a limited way and as one part of a broader political strategy. As the US pursues greater democratisation throughout the Middle East this may yet present Al Qaeda with greater opportunities to achieve their objectives in a more nuanced way, and one that is harder to combat.

That's why the broad strategy the US is pursuing at the moment is so risky. The US is simultaneously: fighting a campaign against Islamism; while spreading democracy in the Middle East and at the same time failing to address many of the issues Muslims hold against them, such as the Israel—Palestine issue. The US may find the combination of these strategies will work against them and their interests in the longer term.

9. Terrorism is not the domain of any one group or ideology

Terrorism doesn't come in one form. Al Qaeda is not the only Islamist or jihadist terrorist group we are facing and Islamist terrorism is not the only type of terrorism that we will be confronted with. By overstating the effects and capabilities of just one group we run the risk of doing their work for them in spreading their influence. We focus on just these forms of terrorism and ignore others at our peril. The US's preoccupation with Middle Eastern terrorism in the 1990s left it ill-prepared to deal with the threat posed by right-wing militants within its own borders as the 1995 Oklahoma bombing showed.

We also need to recognise that an amateur terrorist can be just as deadly as the professional. And finally we can't assume that disparate terrorist groups won't cooperate just because they don't share the same ideology or objectives. Sometimes more material reasons may be enough to force them to collaborate. The concept of "the mission determines the coalition" works just as well for Al Qaeda as it does for the Bush Administration.

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10. The war on terror isn't a war and it's not against terrorism

Terrorism is a tactic and you can't wage a war against a tactic. As former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski remarked, it's like saying the Second World War was a war against blitzkrieg rather than against Nazism. The war on terror as we know it is not a war on terrorism, but a campaign against militant Islam and we need to accept that fact. And calling it a war on terror also signifies it can be won and won through primarily military means, which is clearly not the case.

In fact the campaign the US faces from Al Qaeda is rather more like a global Islamist insurgency rather than international terrorism. Terrorism is just a tactic of the insurgent. And the difficulties the US faces in the insurgency in Iraq is somewhat indicative of the difficulties it ultimately faces in combating the global insurgency it now faces from the jihadists. Similar to the Iraq insurgency, the US doesn't face a hierarchical organisation or centralised command and control system in its global campaign.

Furthermore in both the Iraqi insurgency and global campaign against terrorism the US also doesn't seem to have a good idea of: who it's up against; how many insurgents there are; how they are recruited, what motivates them; and where they are going to strike next. And finally accepting the "terrorism as global insurgency" concept also helps to explain the danger the US currently faces in combating the threat, particularly the risk of ignoring the political/social dimension of the counter-insurgency effort in preference to the military dimension.

11. The global war on terror does not compare to the Cold War

Another popular characterisation of the war on terror by various governments has been to compare it to the Cold War in terms of its seriousness and duration. However, even if armed with weapons of mass destruction, terrorists simply cannot threaten the nation state in the same way that the Soviet Union did in the past. While such attacks would constitute a terrible tragedy, if they did occur, our societies would still survive and move on. Despite government rhetoric to the contrary, for the foreseeable future terrorists will not have the power to destroy states. Only other states can do that. At its height the Soviet Union had millions of men under arms, tens of thousands of nuclear warheads and thousands of tonnes of chemical and biological weapons. By way of comparison estimates suggest that up to 18,000 people may have trained in Al Qaeda's camps.

In stating the similarities with such conflicts the Australian government has also ignored the fact that the US hasn't been adopting the same strategies that it had during the Cold War or Second World War: namely multilateralism, coalition building, nation building and diplomacy backed up by military force (and not the other way around). And where is the modern day equivalent of the Marshall Plan, George Kennan's "X" article, Soviet Army Studies Office, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe or a National Security Directive establishing the institutions and instruments required to prosecute the war?

But not only is the comparison inaccurate, it can also be misleading and dangerous in application when considering our policy responses. It's extremely risky to equate terrorism and non-state actors with concepts and strategies that are predicated on how states behave and act. The Cold War finally ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. The fight against Islamism will not end with the death or capture of Osama bin Laden or the destruction of Al Qaeda.

12. The United States has made Iraq the front line in their war on terror

There's been a growing tendency of the US and Australian governments and some commentators to describe the current conflict in Iraq as now representing the front line in the war on terror. If that is the case then it's only so because the US has made it so by their own actions. Iraq certainly wasn't the front line in the war on terror before the US invasion. In reality what the US currently faces in Iraq is not terrorism but more of a classic insurgency which at times uses terrorist tactics.

Actually if you accept that the threat of terrorism is indeed global, then by definition there can be no particular front line—the nature of terrorism doesn't lend itself to having any lines in the conventional sense whatsoever. It would be far more accurate to characterise Iraq as being the front line in establishing US credibility or otherwise worldwide. That's what

makes the conflict so important to Al Qaeda and like-minded groups.

By linking the two issues the US has made progress in the wider war on terror highly dependant on the results in Iraq. The benefits of success in Iraq are clear. But the cost of failure is even greater, because in order to gain the overall benefits from intervening in Iraq, the US has to win clearly and decisively. But in order for the terrorist to win the US only has to make mistakes along the way. In the longer term Iraq may well stumble its way, somewhat painfully, to something that ultimately resembles a democracy, though not in the Western sense. But in the end that “win” won’t mean much, if in the process, the US has given the jihadists a longer term recruitment and motivation bonanza.

13. Terrorism may have become more globalised but that doesn’t mean geography has become irrelevant

While we naturally focus on the threat of Al Qaeda globally, since its ejection from its main training infrastructure in Afghanistan we seem to be witnessing what many analysts describe as a diversification or decentralisation of the terrorist threat. Terrorism is a global issue but for Australia it is inextricably tied up with the problems of the future stability of our neighbours, particularly Indonesia. Groups like JI may have global links but their motivations, recruiting and operations are caught up in regional issues. That would seem to call for solutions that are tailored to regional problems.

Curiously that’s also the conclusion of the government’s terrorism White Paper which states that “it is in our own region where Australia has its greatest commitment and contribution to make” in combating terrorism. While such a statement is welcomed and sensible it’s curious because that statement is out of step with the government’s past rhetoric that our fight against terror is a global one and not bound by geographic considerations. After all that’s why we’re apparently in Iraq.

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14. In the short to medium term the terrorist threat to Australia is more likely to originate overseas

For the time being the most likely terrorist acts against Australia and Australians will be conducted overseas as well. That doesn’t mean a terrorist incident in Australia isn’t possible or even probable. Undertaking a major terrorist action in Australia, however, would be no easy effort. Attacking Australian embassies, tourists or military forces overseas would be a far easier option. And the most important criteria for terrorists in undertaking an attack is success. Achieving symbolism through failure isn’t a high priority on the terrorists’ wish list.

That means every individual nation’s domestic counter-terrorist policies have an influence on the threat for the rest of the region, for better or for worse. The domestic policy initiatives that respective countries take—such as better border security and immigration procedures, enhancements to domestic security legislation and increased resources and better coordination of intelligence agencies—all act to help limit the spread and influence of terrorism within our respective immediate regions and more broadly. It also means that counter-terrorist measures also can’t be compartmentalised, for example, to effectively combat terrorism may require an increasing blurring between foreign and domestic collection of intelligence, which raises a number of issues such as privacy and civil liberties that will need to be addressed. Finally it calls for an unprecedented level of regional and international cooperation (see fact 17 below).

15. Terrorism can't be met primarily or even predominantly through military force

The threat of terrorism requires a comprehensive whole of government approach with particular emphasis on intelligence, law enforcement and emergency response. Most countries don't have the luxury of using military force the way the US can and does in combating terrorism. In any event the nature of the threat as we face today means the US is likely to find less amenable military targets to hit.

That doesn't mean the military shouldn't have a role in combating the modern threat of terrorism. It certainly has uses in combating state sponsors of terrorism, nation building in failed states, more classic counter-insurgency operations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the use of Special Forces for surgical strikes in addition to more routine intelligence collection and analysis. However the White House may not realise it yet but placing the Pentagon in charge of your overall counter-terrorism strategy is not necessarily the wisest course of action to pursue.

16. Intelligence is the front line defence and offence against terrorism

It's become the best-stated cliché of modern counter-terrorism but that's only because it's true. But despite the cliché one of the major problems we currently face is that we have little understanding of the threat or whom we are fighting. In all the conflicts we've faced over the past fifty years there probably hasn't been a time where we've known less about an opponent than today. And the lack of knowledge doesn't just apply to tactical intelligence, such as knowing when, where and how terrorists are going to strike next. It applies even more to strategic intelligence, such as actually knowing something about the terrorists, who they are, where they come from, what their objectives are, what their motivations are, how they recruit, how they measure success and so on.

We're still not sure whether Al Qaeda has become decentralised after the loss of its Afghan bases or whether it's still a structured organisation. We don't know whether Al Qaeda is capable of conducting its own terrorist



operations or whether the principal danger it represents is acting more as an inspiration and funding base for other like-minded terrorist groups. We really don't know why Al Qaeda hasn't launched a major terrorist operation against the US since 9/11 (or JI against Australia since Bali for that matter). We can't even agree on whether Al Qaeda is now an organisation, movement or ideology.

Even with the best intelligence in the world there is no way that agencies are going to be able to predict or prevent all terrorist attacks.

We don't even seem to know that much about JI which is a far less professional terrorist organisation. Assistance in interviewing and interrogating the 200 jailed JI members to build up a better knowledge base of the organisation and its membership would be one welcome step. Another would be to set up teams of intelligence analysts to think like terrorists, what the military call 'red teaming'. We shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking of terrorists as just murderous barbarians and fool ourselves that we can't possibly think like them, therefore we shouldn't even bother trying. The fact remains that the belief in the use of violence to achieve political objectives isn't just a characteristic of the jihadists. Once we begin to think like them, we'll better understand them, and hence to be able to combat them much more effectively.

But we also need to recognise and accept that intelligence is not an exact science. Even with the best intelligence in the world there is no way that agencies are going to be able to predict or prevent all terrorist attacks.

17. Terrorism as we know it today can't be fought unilaterally

Modern terrorism isn't constrained by national borders, therefore the counter terrorist response cannot afford to be either. It requires regional and international cooperation through organisations such as the UN, G8, ASEAN and APEC amongst others. More importantly it

also requires effective bilateral cooperation between individual countries as evidenced by the Australian Government's counter terrorist agreements with numerous regional countries. Such cooperation is necessary to ensure the effective outlawing of terrorist organisations and associated groups, stronger restrictions on the financing of terrorism and greater assistance in nation building in failed states where terrorism might breed and consolidate its support. It also involves providing assistance in capacity building measures to countries that lack the resources or even will to effectively combat terrorism.

However we need to accept that it's not enough to rely on widespread recognition that terrorism is evil and a universal threat to all nations to motivate international cooperation. As the US has found with enlisting Pakistan's support in its war on terror, gaining such cooperation has a price. We need to be mindful of the possibility that the price paid might come back to haunt us in the longer term.

18. We currently lack decent measures of success against terrorism

According to US President Bush we are currently winning the war on terror. However, according to an anonymous CIA official, the Malaysian Prime Minister, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and a majority of the US population, we're actually losing the war on terror or at least falling behind. Which is the more accurate assessment? One of the biggest challenges facing policy makers is how to measure success in the war on terror. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld summed up the dilemma in late 2003 when he stated, "Today we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"

Since the attacks of September 11 the US and its allies have enjoyed a number of tactical successes. Al Qaeda has been thrown out of its bases in Afghanistan, 70% of Al Qaeda's senior leadership and over 3,400 operatives and

associates are claimed to have been killed or captured and over US\$200 million in terrorism-related financial assets have been seized or frozen in bank accounts internationally.

These metrics used to date have been largely tactical. That can be useful to a certain degree but if you don't know how many recruits or how much money the terrorists had to begin with—let alone how many they recruited since—then it's not that good a measure to live by. Success can also be measured by the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks. But that would be a dangerous assumption to make. For instance in the 4–5 years of planning that Al Qaeda undertook for 9/11 they undertook a number of relatively small scale attacks in Africa and the Persian Gulf. During that time the US Administration may easily have come to the conclusion that the threat of terrorism had largely been contained. Then 9/11 happened.

It's obvious then that we need to consider how we measure strategic success in the war on terror. On one level how we react to terrorist attacks is an important factor, because as mentioned above the aim of the terrorist is to get governments to overreact to terrorist attacks. So Secretary Rumsfeld actually answered his own question when he asked it. You know you're losing the war on terror when your actual counter-terrorist policy and actions—and wider foreign policy—is recruiting, training and deploying more terrorists than you are killing, capturing or dissuading.

By the end of 2003 about 200 JI members had been arrested. But that becomes less significant when measured against the terrorism White Paper's judgement that the numbers of JI members and supporters are likely to be growing and that there are signs that JI's links and influence with other groups within and beyond our region are increasing. That's tantamount to an admission that we're losing the "war on terror" in our region, or in the very best case scenario, not winning.

In any event such successes are largely tactical and hence short-term in nature and that's probably reflected in the lack of attacks in the past three years. But the strategic appeal of Al Qaeda's message remains, and may even

be stronger than before. The question that remains is what governments do during this breathing space they've gained, to combat the threat at a more strategic and lasting level.

19. The only way to combat terrorism is with a comprehensive long-term grand strategy

It's become usual when speaking of our responses to terrorism to focus on the tactical or micro-responses, such as improved security legislation, increased funding to intelligence and law enforcement, more special forces and so on. Indeed if you look at the government's list of achievements taken since 9/11 that's precisely what you'll find, lots of important initiatives, but all at the tactical level. While these initiatives are necessary, they're no substitute for the development of a comprehensive long-term strategy to combat terrorism.

It seems to be widely accepted wisdom that the modern threat of terrorism cannot be met through the actions and policies of any one government department or any one nation. It requires a whole of government, whole-of-nation and international effort to effectively combat the threat.

But despite the emphasis we seem to place on the seriousness of the terrorist threat and the required response, Australia still has no overarching national counter-terrorism strategy. We have a National Counter-Terrorism Plan to deal with terrorist attacks after they occur but no whole-of-government, whole-of-nation strategy to fight it on a comprehensive, ongoing and long-term basis. The Australian Government's recently released terrorism *White Paper, Transnational Terrorism: The Threat to Australia*, could have been a useful vehicle to develop such a strategy.

White Papers normally have two functions, the first is as a public information document, the second is to provide a policy framework and broad strategy to guide government decision making for at least the next five years and beyond. The best that could be said about the government's terrorism White Paper is that it reflects more of the former.

20. Terrorism is a threat that needs to be kept in context and sharp perspective

Underlying all of these factors is the need to place the threat of terrorism in some perspective and context. If we accept that the new strategic environment is characterised by complexity and uncertainty then we also need to accept that such complexity defies any one single issue or threat from dominating the strategic agenda. That includes the threat of terrorism, no matter how serious that threat may appear to us to be at present.

Australians are still at greater risk of being run over while crossing the road than they are falling victim to a terrorist attack.

And just because terrorism is a long-term form of warfare and is likely to confront us for the next 20–30 years it does not mean it will be *the* defining issue that confronts us for those 20–30 years. The relationship between the US and China has a far greater and longer-term impact on our national interests than the threat of terrorism. And the threat of instability in our immediate region is a critical issue in determining our security. Terrorism is but one means to make that threat a reality, but it is not the threat itself.

In actual fact the main reason terrorism will be a serious security issue confronting us for the next 20–30 years is that it's been a serious security issue confronting us for the past 20–30 years. The events of 11 September 2001 didn't change that fact, they simply highlighted it. In the final analysis, despite many perceptions to the contrary, Australians are still at greater risk of being run over while crossing the road than they are falling victim to a terrorist attack.

* *This paper is based on a presentation made by the author to the 2004 Fulbright Symposium, July 5–7 2004, Brisbane, Australia.*

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