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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Dealing with Bombs in Rural Exeter: Global Threat, Local Response**

Ong Weichong

10 June 2008

*The recent bomb attack on Exeter, England, demonstrated that global threats occur in centres of power as well as their peripheries. As such, an adequate local response and local leadership are crucial in both the prevention and 'firefighting' roles.*

THE BOMB attack on 22 May, 2008 in Exeter city centre sent shockwaves throughout the Southwest of England. The first obvious question that sprang to mind was why Exeter, a sleepy cathedral city of 111,000 set in rural Devon. Exeter is by no means a stranger to bomb attacks. During the Second World War, from 1940 to 1942, Exeter was a frequent target of German bombing raids. The recent bomb attack by Nicky Reilly, a radicalized convert to Islam however is an incursion of a different kind.

### **Threat in the Global Space**

The threat confronting the United Kingdom now, as in 1939-1945, has a global face and fills the global space. The similarities however depart from there. The bomb attack on 22 May, 2008 came just three days after Sir Richard Dearlove delivered a lecture at Exeter University on *National Security for the 21st Century: New Threats, New Approaches*. Sir Richard, former head of MI6, highlighted that the diffusion of power has empowered non-state actors to challenge the authority and power of nation states. Indeed, the end of the Cold War has ushered in an era where wars and conflicts are predominantly non-interstate, transnational or within states. However, this does not necessarily mean that we have seen the end of wars between states structured on the Westphalian model.

As stated by the ever perceptive doyen of strategic thought, Colin S. Gray, 'irregular warfare in all its forms remains a notably under-regulated field of strategic behaviour'. Indeed, state-on-state wars and conflicts are fought on very different rules from those with non-state actors. Moreover, the highly irregular, ill-defined modus operandi and Area of operations (AOs) of non-state armed actors do not fit into any convenient paradigm that government intelligence agencies can easily pinpoint.

Channel 4 television reported that MI5 was "aware of Reilly but he was not the subject of a live

investigation”. Regardless of the veracity of the news report, the readily identifiable air armada of German bombers heading for the Southwest of England in World War Two stood in marked contrast to a nondescript local lad travelling on a public bus from Plymouth to Exeter. Unlike the German *Luftwaffe* and present day national armed forces, non-state armed actors do not have a readily identifiable Order of Battle (Orbat) that one can pin-up in the centre of the Operations Planning Room. Instead of sprawling bases bristling with highly visible military hardware, non-state armed actors often operate in small independent units in local AOs without a readily identifiable HQ.

More often than not, that HQ exists not in the form of a conventional military structure but rather in the domain of cyberspace as well as an avatar of a visionary idea in the global space. Such a structure allows for the formation of cells and recruitment of members without the costly apparatus of centralised recruitment centres, a high level of tactical and operational flexibility, and most importantly, the ability to sustain and regenerate itself and morph in accordance with the strategic, operational, and tactical terrain.

### **Response in the local hills**

The bomb attack on Exeter might be viewed as a departure from the more familiar attacks on key British metropolitan areas such as London and Glasgow. That view however ignores the fact that in order to stay ahead of their materially more well-endowed opponents, non-state armed actors have to be and are often highly flexible in their modus operandi and range of AOs. The diversified tactics of non-state armed actors must be met with an equally holistic and timely response from the authorities. This means the ability to react quickly on the ground and, more importantly, entrusting the local security apparatus and personnel as well as local communities to do the job.

Throughout the first two days of the incident, police statements providing details of the suspect, his travel pattern on the day of the bombing incident and appeals for further information were made in a timely manner to the public. Explosive and Ordnance Disposal (EOD) capacity came in the form of a Royal Navy EOD team from a local Devon naval base. Local Muslim leaders in Plymouth, including the head of Islamic Centre where Nicky Reilly used to worship, were quick to express their shock and distress at the incident. They also emphasized the moderate nature of the 3,500-large Muslim community in Plymouth while condemning all forms of religious extremism. In short, the immediate response has largely been a local-led affair.

The primacy of local policing and local leadership in counter-terror operations is however nothing new to the British. During the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), field operations were largely decentralised with local police playing a crucial role in deterring terrorist attacks, gathering human intelligence (Humint) as well as being the initial response to any attacks. As of now, the investigation of the 22 May Exeter bombing is headed by the local Devon and Cornwall Police with the assistance of other government agencies.

### **Lessons for Singapore**

Fighting what is called ‘The Three Block War’, contemporary armed forces will increasingly find themselves in AOs where they have to engage with hostile, friendly and neutral forces within the localised geographical confines of ‘three blocks’. While there is a need for a credible conventional military deterrent and maintenance of competent traditional warfighting capabilities, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) must be able to respond to threats of a less conventional nature in the form of military operations other than war (MOOTW).

Local police forces in local AOs are fundamental in counter-terror operations. Local police officers are the ones most familiar with the local neighbourhoods and their communities and a vital tool in the gathering of Humint. Violence motivated by religious radicalism is a global threat that strikes

physically in both metropolitan centres of power as well as the periphery. In the event of a terror attack, a timely and adequate immediate response from local 'boots on the ground' is crucial to the containment of the situation as well as follow-up investigations.

As well as a whole-of-government approach, a whole-of-society approach is needed to counter the threat of religious violence. Inter-faith dialogue and community integration are the right strategies to pursue but they must reach down to the grassroots and local neighbourhoods rather than remain ensconced in the ivory towers of religious scholars and elites.

Military action, policing and other forms of state response can only stem the tide of religious violence, not neutralise it. To truly remove 'the man with the knife' who moves within the village, requires the villagers that constitute the local as well as global village to repudiate the ideology that feeds religious violence. Until such is achieved, we can only hold the tide of religious violence without truly taming it.

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