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Remembering 9/11: Are We Any Safer Today?

By Tan Teck Boon & Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The world remains vulnerable to major terror attacks because intelligence agencies continue to withhold information from legitimate users. Why is this so and what can be done to promote informational exchanges?

Commentary

IS THE world safer from terrorism on the 15th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington DC? If the intelligence lapses that led to 9/11 remain in place, then the world at present cannot be safer from major terror attacks than it was 15 years ago. Today, it is a matter of public record that clues pointing to 9/11 were in the possession of select US intelligence agencies. However, they were withheld from other relevant agencies.

In late December 1999, while monitoring an al-Qaeda phone number in Sana'a, Yemen, the National Security Agency (NSA) – America's leading signals intelligence agency – intercepted a phone conversation instructing two 9/11 hijackers, Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, to travel to Kuala Lumpur for a meeting with other known terror suspects. That meeting, we now know, set in motion plans for the 9/11 attacks.

Hazy Road to 9/11

Acting on the NSA's tip off, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – America's foreign

intelligence agency – placed al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar under surveillance as the two travelled to Malaysia. During al-Mihdhar's stopover in Dubai, the CIA managed to make a photocopy of al-Mihdhar's passport and when CIA officers examined it, they were stunned that al-Mihdhar held a valid multiple-entry visa to the United States. Still, the CIA did not alert the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – the US agency responsible for protecting the US homeland from terror attacks.

Al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar eluded surveillance in Kuala Lumpur and from Bangkok, they boarded a flight for Los Angeles. On 15 January 2000, they arrived at their destination and passed through US customs undetected. The two made no attempt to hide their presence in the US, obtaining driver's licences in their own names and even used a local bank to receive funds from a known al-Qaeda financier. Al-Hazmi's name was also listed in the California phone book and several calls were made from al-Hazmi's phone in California to the al-Qaeda phone in Yemen.

At that point, the NSA must have known that there were al-Qaeda operatives in the US. But it too did not alert the FBI. Even after the NSA and CIA had enough information in late 2000 linking al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, the US embassy bombings in Africa and the attack on the USS Cole, they still did not make it known to the FBI that al-Qaeda operatives could already be in the US.

Only in late August 2001 did the CIA alert the FBI but by then, it was too late. The al-Qaeda plan involving Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar (as well as the other 9/11 hijackers) had proceeded too far along for any last-minute FBI investigation to thwart. Both men would hijack Flight 77 and crash it into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Barriers to Intelligence Sharing

While there were certainly other lapses, the failure to share information between US intelligence agencies is considered a central cause of 9/11. The NSA and CIA had received information indicating the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in the US but did not share what they knew with the FBI. Though the information was fragmentary, it would almost certainly have set off alarms.

Today, this problem continues to plague intelligence agencies around the world. There are many reasons why intelligence agencies withhold information but three major ones are worth mentioning.

Firstly, even friendly intelligence agencies feud and when these spats are left to fester, they can eventually poison the atmosphere for cooperation. Needless to say, intelligence officers are less inclined to share information when they are at loggerheads. Why did the CIA withhold information on al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar from FBI? Because incessant CIA-FBI feuding had poisoned inter-agency relations to the point where they simply stopped talking.

Secondly, intelligence agencies are by nature secretive and calls for these hermetic organisations to share information are fundamentally at odds with their institutional DNA. The problem is that secrecy is a double-edged sword; it can protect sensitive

secrets like sources and methods from being exposed (rendering them worthless) but it can also become counter-productive when intelligence agencies bottle up information and 9/11 is an excellent case in point.

Thirdly, intelligence agencies have a tendency to withhold information from legitimate users when sharing information does not serve their interests. If the FBI had been tipped off to the presence of al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar in the US, it might swiftly have arrested them. However, such premature arrests might not have made sense to the CIA since it could collect more intelligence on al-Qaeda by placing al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar under surveillance. While there is no solid evidence to suggest that this was the factor that prompted CIA to withhold information from the FBI, this problem is very real in the cloak and dagger world.

Intelligence Sharing the Key

Good intelligence – not military might – is the first line of defence against terrorism. Unlike conventional armies, terrorists do not wear uniforms and drive fancy tanks. They hide among civilians, use whatever is available to them as weapons and strike when and where they are least expected. So information on their identities, whereabouts and modus operandi is the key to defeating them.

By sharing information, intelligence agencies increase their chances of fusing fragmentary clues into a coherent picture of imminent terror attacks. It also reduces the risk of vital information being withheld from legitimate users. In short, intelligence sharing is fundamental to keeping us safe in this age where terrorism is the “New Normal”. How that might be accomplished is more difficult to answer.

As a response to 9/11, the US created an entirely new organisation – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) – to break down the barriers that hampered informational exchanges between its many intelligence agencies. Evidence thus far suggests that the ODNI is making some headways.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated by recent lone wolf attacks in the US and Europe inspired by the so-called Islamic State (IS), multilateral intelligence sharing remains a work in progress. Given their resourcefulness, it is only a matter of time before terrorists notice that too – if they haven’t already.

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