

Step back and take a look at the smaller picture

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Sydney Morning Herald
11 September 2004

The bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on Thursday, attributed to Jema'ah Islamiya (JI), highlights the interplay between the global and local dimensions of contemporary terrorism.

Taking the global line, some commentators have already pointed to the Australian election as a possible motivation for the attack. On the surface at least, there are echoes of the Madrid bombing of March 2004, through which Al-Qaeda undermined an incumbent conservative prime minister and, arguably, helped to elect a young socialist leader who had been critical of his predecessor's closeness to Washington.

In the minds of many, regional terrorism reveals the malign influence of Middle Eastern Islamism on the inherently placid Islamic culture of Southeast Asia. Ironically, such a view is taken by both proponents and opponents of the Iraq war.

The former argue that overthrowing Saddam was essential to draining a "Middle Eastern swamp" that was polluting Islam worldwide. The latter argue that the Iraq war, and the failure to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have only exacerbated the terrorist threat worldwide.

Both perspectives underestimate a more complex reality.

The financial and technical links forged with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan have undoubtedly helped JI's ability to plan and launch attacks. JI's training manuals also reflect the ideas of Middle Eastern Islamist ideologues such as Abdullah Azzam, the famous veteran of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets considered by some as an early inspiration for al-Qaeda's jihadist worldview.

There is a danger, however, that a pre-occupation with the global "war on terror" invests transnational linkages with more coherence than they possess and underplays local factors.

Violent Islamism is neither new to Indonesia nor imported, as illustrated by the violent Darul Islam revolt of the 1940s to 1960s. Few experts consider JI simply to be an arm of al-Qaeda, executing its commands. In fact the al-Qaeda model presents JI with a quandary. This is reflected by a debate within JI about whether attacks such as that against the Australian embassy, which usually kill more Indonesians than westerners, actually serve its local interests.

Furthermore, it is not just Australians who are going to the polls. Indonesia is in the middle of presidential elections. JI's spiritual head, Abu Bakr Bashir, is soon to go on trial and JI argues that Australian pressure on Jakarta is the only reason this is occurring.

The balance between the global and the local then, should inform our understanding of terrorism – and our response to it.

After Jakarta, some Australians will sound the siren song of retrenchment – that we should pull back from our neighbours and thicken our traditional global alliances. 'Good fences make good neighbours', goes the argument.

But the explosion in Rasuna Said Street proves the folly of this line. We have interests, assets and people throughout the region and the globe. We have a network of 160 diplomatic missions, not to mention approximately one million Australians offshore. About fifty thousand Australians are based in Southeast Asia, and four hundred Australian companies maintain a presence in Indonesia.

That adds up to a lot of front gates. Protecting them will require the goodwill of our friends and neighbours. And ensuring this goodwill persists will require our leaders to exercise public restraint – a difficult task only one month before a federal poll. In our anger we should remember that the attack took place on Indonesian soil and most victims were Indonesians. Any Australian gesture that appeared calculated to pursue marginal seat voters rather than Islamist terrorists would be highly counter-productive.

Fortunately, the framework for cooperation between Indonesian and Australian authorities is already in place. The aftermath of the Marriott bombing saw quiet, effective assistance provided by the Australian Federal Police, ASIO and other agencies to their Indonesian counterparts.

Former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once asked what could most easily steer a government off course. 'Events', he famously replied. Events can also steer countries off course. In order to capture the perpetrators of the embassy bombing and protect our people and our interests, Australia needs to avoid a course that emphasizes global at the expense of regional imperatives.

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