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Homeland Security Strategies: The United States Approach

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On 24 November 2002, President George W. Bush signed the Homeland Security Bill, creating a new Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It brought together under one new roof almost 170 000 personnel from twenty-two existing agencies and government departments including the Coast Guard, Customs, and the Secret Service. This is generally regarded as the most significant reorganisation of the United States (US) federal government since the creation of the Department of Defence after World War II.

Structure and Functions

The DHS is tasked with seven missions, of which the key are the prevention of and reduction of vulnerability of the USA to terrorist attacks, the minimisation of damage and assistance in recovery from terrorist attacks that do occur, and the monitoring of connections between illegal drug trafficking and terrorism.

The Department is headed by the Secretary for Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, who is assisted by a Deputy Secretary and four Under Secretaries, in charge of the following functions: Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection, Science and Technology in Support of Homeland Security, Border and Transportation Security, and Emergency Preparedness and Response.

The DHS is, in the words of President Bush, the “front line of protecting America.” The impetus behind its creation was the perception amongst decision-makers that the defence of the USA against future terrorist threats required a “unified, effective response.” The obvious implication was that government counter-terrorist mechanisms before 11 September 2001 were unable to effectively prevent the perpetration of terrorism against the USA. The reasons for this failure ultimately derive from one major flaw, namely the lack of coordination between numerous government branches and agencies that have some role in this counter-terrorism function. The creation of the DHS was therefore seen as the logical solution to this problem of the lack of inter-agency coordination.

As mentioned, the DHS coordinates the tasks and functions of a vast array of existing government branches and agencies that have some relation to the objective of protecting the USA from terrorist activities. It will have to coordinate and collate the intelligence information of such disparate federal agencies as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as the National Security Agency (NSA). Other existing agencies and organisations that will fall under its purview include the US Coast Guard, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the Transportation Security Agency, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institute of Health. Coordinating such disparate organisations and agencies will be a difficult task. In addition the DHS will also have to coordinate the local, state and private sector organisations that have functions relating to the protection of the USA against terrorist activities.

Evaluation

The consolidation of existing agencies concerned with security is a good idea, particularly having one organisation for the agencies critical for homeland security. Consolidating these agencies into a single

bureaucracy, will enhance intelligence processing of terrorist threats to the USA, and enable the relevant government authorities to act on such intelligence with greater rapidity and flexibility.

The key concern, however, is that the creation of the DHS preceded the formulation of a coherent homeland security strategy. There was a fairly clear identification of the missions of the DHS, but “missions do not add up to a coherent, integrated strategy.” Strategy determines the missions that need to be accomplished, not the other way around. It was the selection of a maritime strategy, for instance, that made the US Navy’s interdiction of Japanese sea lines of communication during World War II an important mission. Of course, the ability to complete particular missions is an important element in the selection of strategy.

Lacking a coherent homeland security strategy, a number of potential clashes of inter-agency interests may be inevitable, especially as the DHS has to supervise and coordinate the very disparate activities of many pre-existing governmental agencies. Conflicts are inevitable as established government agencies (with long-standing organisational cultures and interests) struggle to cope with the possibly competing organisational cultures and interests of hitherto separate and distinct agencies that have been brought under one roof suddenly. This is more so for previously separate agencies with overlapping functions – for instance, the consolidation of the US Coast Guard and INS, both of which have not entirely similar but overlapping missions and functions. There is the danger of wastage of resources through the needless duplication of services, and more important, reduced effectiveness of either agency as a result of this intra-department conflict.

Lessons

At one level, it might appear that the US experience holds little relevance for Singapore. Unlike the US, Singapore has adopted a network approach to homeland security coordination. A number of inter-ministerial agencies coordinate various aspects of intelligence and operations. They include the National Security Task Force and the Homefront Security Centre, both situated in the Ministry of Home Affairs. The latter centre oversees joint exercises as well as counter-terrorist operations. It works closely with the Ministry of Defence, which has established a National Security Secretariat to coordinate strategic information and policy for counter-terrorism. There is also a Joint Counter Terrorism Centre, which coordinates intelligence on terrorists. They all report to the Security Policy Review Committee chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence and security, Dr Tony Tan, and comprises the Ministers of Defence, Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs. The new security architecture is designed to improve regional and international cooperation in counter-terrorism, particularly in the sharing of intelligence, greater inter-ministerial coordination, and enhance joint operations between the civil and military forces in countering terrorism.

The Singapore approach would seem to be less likely to produce clashes of interests and cultures of the kind experienced by the merging of different organisations and agencies in the US. However the potential for problems cannot be ruled out, given the traditional separation of functions and roles between the SAF and SPF and the leading role played by the Internal Security Department in countering all forms of security threats to Singapore, including terrorism. It is not clear that their roles have been rationalised within the coordinating network, or even that a clear homeland security strategy has been formulated. It would seem that the missions for the various agencies have been identified before such an integrated strategy has been developed.

This assessment is highly tentative, given the lack of open information about the security network of Singapore. However one should guard against the possibility of separate government agencies tending to duplicate each other’s functions, or have a clash of interests, which could undermine the efforts of the Singapore Government to prepare a coherent counter-terrorist platform with which to protect the vital interests and resources of the state.

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