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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **The SMRT Security Breach: Strategic Implications in the Post 9/11 Era**

By Kumar Ramakrishna

### **Synopsis**

*The recent SMRT depot security breach is a cause for concern as railway systems have been targets of terrorist attacks worldwide. To boost its physical and social resilience, Singapore needs to mainstream psychological resilience with a mature situational awareness.*

### **Commentary**

IN AUGUST 2011 a northbound SMRT train was found to be spray-painted with graffiti and pulled out of service. Investigations showed that the train had likely been vandalised while parked at the Bishan Depot, where a breach was found in the perimeter fencing. The Land Transport Authority expressed concern as it was not the first time such an incident had occurred. In May 2010, two vandals had cut through the perimeter fencing at SMRT's Changi Depot and spray-painted graffiti on the side of a train as well.

The second SMRT depot breach is a genuine cause for concern. Beyond the public nuisance that vandalism poses it raises a threat from the Homeland Security angle as well. The same logic used in the Changi Depot breach can be applied: if relatively unsophisticated thrill-seeking vandals can gain unauthorised access to SMRT trains, it is inevitable that trained and determined terrorists with more sinister aims could do so as well.

### **Reasons for Concern**

There are four reasons for taking the recent security breaches seriously:

Firstly, worldwide, train networks have been targeted by terrorists, resulting in mass casualties. The Madrid attacks of March 2004, the London Underground incidents of July 2005 and the Mumbai railway station attacks of November 2008 come to mind. Train networks – be they crowded train stations or the carriages themselves – remain stock terrorist targets because they are "target-rich environments". One successful strike can kill and maim scores of people, generating the publicity and political influence that terrorists seek as well having strategic impact. In fact, the Madrid train bombings led to the fall of the incumbent Spanish government and the subsequent withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq.

Secondly, it is known that Singapore remains an iconic terrorist target because of its close and long-standing relationship with Israel and the United States – the so-called "Jews" and "Crusaders" pilloried in Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah propaganda. Recently the Indonesian police revealed that terrorists in that country had sought to target the Singapore embassy in Jakarta. Last year a map of the MRT network with the busy Orchard station marked out was found in the possession of a known Indonesian terrorist as well.

Thirdly, it should be realised that terrorists also follow the news; so it is important not to advertise that the authorities, by allowing yet another breach of train security, are not taking this matter seriously enough. That would be a wrong signal, however unintended. I have witnessed detained Indonesian terrorists and Abu Sayyaf leaders in the Philippines arguing about the finer nuances of general strategy and tactics, showing the degree to which they remain committed to their ideological aims.

These are people who have invested their entire lives in the Cause and it behooves us not to underestimate either their commitment or intelligence.

Fourthly, according to one simple and well-known formula, Overall Risk is the product of Threat multiplied by Capability and Vulnerability or  $R = T \times C \times V$ . It may be asserted that the Overall Risk of a terrorist strike in Singapore should not be overblown. Even if foreign terrorists have the intention and capability to attack Singapore – that is, the values of T and C in the above formula are high, the Overall Risk or R remains pretty low. This is because the physical safeguards against foreign-based terrorists in place since 9/11 render the Vulnerability quotient, or value of V, low. However if V is relatively high, mounting an effective strike would require a correspondingly lower Capability.

In this connection trained and committed foreign terrorists may find creative ways to use unsophisticated locals (Low Capability) to break into train depots (High Vulnerability) and conceal Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) timed to go off during peak hours. In short, the Overall Risk goes up, not because of the Threat and Capability of the trained foreign terrorists, but because of the relatively high value of V. That means unskilled locals, like mischievous young vandals, unaware that they are being used by terrorists, or untrained but self-radicalised individuals following online instructions, could breach weak security barriers and hence do the terrorists' job for them.

### **Wider Implications**

Singapore has undoubtedly done much since the September 11 2001 attacks to cope with the threat of transnational terrorism. Stringent controls on the movement of hazardous and strategic materials; efficient tracking of vessels in the waters around the port; stronger co-ordination between local security and intelligence agencies and co-operation with their foreign counterparts; and grassroots participation in emergency exercises and cross-faith community engagement have done much to strengthen physical and social resilience against terrorist attack. However, as the latest SMRT lapse seems to indicate, it is perhaps in the vital area of psychological resilience that more can be done.

One aspect of psychological resilience involves raising the keen situational awareness needed to detect and quickly plug potential vulnerabilities throughout our national security ecosystem. Situational awareness is needed at all levels and spheres of society -- from the teacher noting the steadily hardening extremist views of a particular student; to the neighbourhood physician detecting signs amongst his patients of possible bioterrorism; to the shopkeeper noting an unusual amount of chemical fertiliser being purchased; and transport operators taking heed of any repeated attempted breaches of depot perimeter fencing. This list is not exhaustive.

To be keenly situationally aware while not being overly paranoid is the balance that true psychological resilience requires. One has to be alert but not alarmed. Ten years after 9/11, over and above physical and social resilience, mainstreaming psychological resilience with a mature situational awareness, may well enhance the comprehensive hardening of Singapore against potential terrorist attack.

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