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Lessons from Hamas' Assault on Israel

By Kenneth Yeo

SYNOPSIS

The 7 October assault on Israel by Hamas showcased the latter's advanced offensive capabilities besides underscoring the fragility of peace in the region. This commentary highlights three insights: 1) the importance of constant vigilance even in times of peace; 2) the new threat from the air arising from the use of drones and paragliders; and 3) the shifting focus of global attention on crises, which can have an impact on the availability of international support and resources in an open armed conflict.

COMMENTARY

It would be an understatement to say that the 7 October attack by Hamas on Israel has taken the world by surprise. The assault has mired the Middle East into greater chaos, complicating the already complex and politically charged nature of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian issue. Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Israel has fought its Arab neighbours time and again to ensure its survival in the Middle East.

Drawing Lessons from Hamas' Assault

The unexpected attack on Israel by Hamas forces from the Gaza Strip has been unprecedented. Hamas fighters flew into Israel using paragliders and attacked an outdoor music festival by air. Bulldozers breached the fortified fences separating Gaza from Israel, letting in numerous Hamas fighters. Drones were used to destroy Israel's prized Merkava Mk4 tanks. There were also reports of an amphibious landing on Israel's Mediterranean coast.

Approximately 5,000 rockets were fired from Gaza, quickly exhausting the rocket interceptors of Israel's vaunted Iron Dome. The Lebanese Hezbollah also launched rocket attacks on northern Israel. The result of Hamas' attack was devastating for Israel: so far, more than 1,400 Israelis (military personnel and civilians alike) were

killed while an estimated 155 were taken into Gaza as hostages. Israel has responded forcefully to this violence, bombing Hamas fighters and their hideouts in Gaza besides cutting off food, water and electricity supplies to Palestinians living in the enclave. An Israeli ground offensive to destroy Hamas is imminent.

Essentially, no matter what one's political affiliation is, deliberately attacking civilians for a political cause cannot be condoned or justified. As the current conflict unfolds, death and destruction on both sides of the border will increase in the days ahead. Beyond the hope that the current clash can be ended sooner to avoid further loss of life on both sides, it is crucial for Southeast Asia to draw early lessons from it.

Maintaining Vigilance as Peace is not a Permanent Condition

Hamas' attack happened at a time when Israel had made peace with multiple Arab countries including Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, while peace negotiations were going on with Saudi Arabia. The Palestinian issue had also receded into the background for some time as the world focused its attention on the larger US-China rivalry and the Russia-Ukraine war.

This generally more conducive climate for Israel led to greater calls amongst international and non-government organisations for the de-securitisation of Israeli's military apparatus in the West Bank and Gaza in the run-up to Hamas' attack. Terrorist groups like Hamas know how to exploit such sentiments. The lesson Israel and other states will learn from this incident is that peace must never be taken for granted, and that security and national sovereignty should not be politicised.

In recent years, Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and the Philippines have significantly reduced their levels of terrorism significantly. Between 2018 and 2023, almost 1,000 people facing terrorism charges were arrested in Indonesia, and almost 4,000 terrorist combatants surrendered in the Philippines.

It is essential that we do not misread these indicators and regard terrorist groups in the region as being in permanent decline. As we take heart in the de-escalation of terrorism, we must remain vigilant and prepared for any sudden escalation of the problem because peace is not a permanent condition and given the severe destruction and trauma experienced by the disaffected population concerned.

Deploying New Weapons from the Air

The aerial domain has always been alluring for terrorists. It allows its users to project forces rapidly, bypassing frontlines and ignoring geography. Before the advent of drones and other cheap off-the-shelf solutions, airplane hijackings and bombings were the favoured modus operandi of many terrorist groups. As aviation authorities and airport security learned to thwart them, such terror attacks against airplanes have declined.

Today, aerial drones are the new "poor man's smart bombs" and will replace the need for suicide bombers. Terrorist groups have exploited this new technology as drones have the ability to deliver payloads to their targets with precision and are highly adaptable to any last-second adjustment. It is these attributes and the ability of the

user to control it remotely, that drones of various forms have been deployed in conflicts spanning spectrums ranging from conventional warfare to asymmetric conflicts.

The use of paragliders by Hamas fighters on 7 October has potentially changed how terrorists exploit the aerial dimension, not only to launch attacks but also to put boots on the ground and to capture terrain. Worryingly, paragliders are cheap, easy to produce, and easy to deploy.

It is important for a study to be done to examine the utility of this technology in mountainous, densely forested, and archipelagic terrain, where most of the region's violence have occurred. A review of the rules of engagement for non-state parachuters is also needed in the light of Hamas' successful use of "paratroopers".

Winning the Media War

War is never about battlefield gains only. It is also about communicating values and winning the hearts and minds of the people. But who exactly is "the people"? Historically, "the people" refers to the local population affected by the war. However, as was seen in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, it is also increasingly important to win the hearts and minds of the international community.

In its war with Russia, Ukraine benefitted greatly from its skilful use of the media. For example, the coup that took place in Myanmar in February 2021 was overshadowed by the Russia-Ukraine War (which began a year later), when Ukraine's media machinery enabled it to garner the international support Ukraine needed to sustain the warfighting at the expense of the Myanmar coup. For this reason, President Volodymyr Zelinsky of Ukraine is right to be [worried](#) that the current Israel-Palestine conflict will have an adverse impact on the global attention and resources needed for Ukraine to continue its war with Russia.

Israel, too, will do everything it can to win international sympathy and support for its cause. As the Myanmar coup was sidelined by the Russia-Ukraine war, so too Israel's war with Hamas can potentially sideline Ukraine's war efforts. For countries at war, the reality is that international sympathy and support can wax or wane.

In the present geopolitical climate, there is a general perception that the US and its allies are stretching their military resources thin, and that the aid available for their proteges is dwindling. Opportunistic states or non-state actors may exploit this situation to escalate tensions with their adversaries.

International organisations not directly involved in the Israeli-Hamas and Ukraine-Russia conflicts should increase and improve the channels of communication between rival political entities to mitigate such escalations of violence, as every conflict takes international resources away from humanitarian needs.

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