

Watching Brief on the War on Terrorism

Introduction and background to the Inquiry

The post September 11 strategic environment

- 1.1 The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States changed the global strategic security environment in fundamental ways. Governments throughout the world, including Australia, are responding to these threats to security.
- 1.2 The most significant consequence of the changed strategic environment is the real possibility of a mass terror strike either in Australia itself, or against Australian interests abroad. As noted in the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Strategic Assessment paper for 2002 entitled 'Beyond Bali',

The second development at the global level, seen first on September 11 and reinforced on October 12, is the use by terrorist networks of mass casualty tactics...The shift in tactics reflects a difference in the political objectives of today's global networks compared to those of their predecessors...al Qaeda and its affiliates do not want negotiation, compromise or concessions...There may therefore be no constraints on the scale of violence they use.¹

- 1.3 *Advancing the National Interest*, Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper released in April 2003, describes the post September 11 and Bali security environment in the following terms:

1 Beyond Bali, ASPI's Strategic Assessment 2002, p. 8

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States and 12 October 2002 in Bali have been defining events. They have changed Australia's security environment in significant ways. They starkly demonstrated that threats to Australia's security can be global as well as regional.²

And:

Terrorist attacks will continue to be in the form of 'asymmetric' responses to the military, economic and political power of the United States and other Western countries. They exploit the openness that comes from the expansion of trade, travel and communications in an increasingly integrated global economy.³

- 1.4 On 22 May 2002 the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) announced that it would conduct a Watching Brief on the War on Terrorism. The purpose of the Watching Brief was to enable Parliament to monitor, consider and report on Australia's ongoing commitment to the War on Terrorism.
- 1.5 At the outset the Committee received a series of private briefings from Defence personnel, other Commonwealth officials and independent experts on the nature of Australia's commitment to the War on Terrorism, on domestic and regional risks and on causes and possible responses to emerging terrorist threats.
- 1.6 Also as part of the original Watching Brief the Committee examined Australia's military contribution to the US - led Coalition Against Terrorism and to this end obtained support from the Minister for Defence for a delegation of members to travel to the Middle East and Central Asia to meet with and express support for the Australian forces deployed in Kuwait, the Persian Gulf, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. The visit took place in the period 21 July to 1 August 2002. A report entitled *Visit to Australian Forces deployed to the International Coalition against Terrorism*, was tabled in Parliament on 21 October 2002.

New inquiry focus post Bali bombing

- 1.7 While the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States changed the strategic security environment globally, their impact was reinforced tragically for Australians by the bombings in Bali on 12 October 2002. As a result of this attack the Committee turned its attention in its Watching

2 Advancing the National Interest, Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper, p.ix

3 Advancing the National Interest, p. 17

Brief to a consideration of Australia's ability to manage the consequences of a terrorist attack.

Focus on managing the consequences of a terrorist attack

- 1.8 In the wake of the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002, in which 88 Australians were killed, severely injured survivors were airlifted to Darwin by the RAAF and later to other Australian cities, for emergency treatment. The Committee directed the focus of the Watching Brief on the War on Terrorism to considering the ability of the States and Territories to respond to the consequences of a terrorist attack.
- 1.9 The Committee held its first public hearing on 9 December 2002, to which officials from the Commonwealth agencies responsible for co-ordinating the national response to a terrorist attack on Australian territory gave evidence.
- 1.10 On 5 February 2003 the Committee resolved to expand its original Watching Brief to consider consequence management issues in the light of the Government's stated commitments to provide additional resources to the States to enable them to better respond to a terrorist attack.
- 1.11 On 26 March 2003 Defence Minister Hill handed down a reference to the Committee which 'without limiting the ongoing Watching Brief on the War on Terrorism,' asked the Committee to inquire into and report on 'the preparedness of Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and agencies to respond to and manage the consequences of a terrorist attack on Australia.' The Committee adopted the reference on the same day.
- 1.12 A series of public hearings on the capacity of the Federal and State governments to respond to a terrorist incident in Australia were held in all states and territories during the course of 2003. Their purpose was to hear from local coordinators of the National Counter Terrorism Strategy, police and emergency service agencies and health service providers on their ability to manage the consequences of an attack. The Committee began the series of hearings in Perth on 2 April 2003 and held further hearings in Darwin on 17 July, Melbourne on 15 August, Brisbane on 7 November and Sydney, Hobart and Adelaide on 18, 19, and 20 November 2003, respectively.
- 1.13 The issues which the Committee chose to focus on in the hearings were:
 - The response and management capabilities in each jurisdiction;
 - The capabilities that can be provided at short notice to supplement local resources; and

- The nature and likely effectiveness of the mechanisms in place to ensure a swift and well-coordinated response.
- 1.14 Overall, the Committee's aim was to critically examine the state of Australia's preparedness to respond to a terrorist attack – providing a measure of confidence to the community that appropriate arrangements are in place or, if they are not, making recommendations aimed at identifying any shortcomings.
- 1.15 There were sixteen Submissions received from the states and territories and the Committee acknowledges gratefully the assistance and cooperation of all jurisdictions in facilitating the conduct of this inquiry.