

The New National Threat Assessment Centre

Background

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has been the agency responsible for producing threat assessments in relation to terrorism and politically motivated violence (PMV) since Justice Hope's 1979 Protective Security Review report.

Threat assessments are essentially assessments of the 'likelihood and probable nature of acts of politically motivated violence and other acts prejudicial to security, against specific people, places and events'.¹ They are issued by ASIO primarily on the threat to Australian dignitaries in Australia or overseas, foreign dignitaries and interests in Australia, Government buildings and diplomatic premises, commercial aviation, and since 11 September 2001, critical infrastructure such as energy, water and communications facilities. They are also issued on the threat posed by public protests. It is important to note that while the right to engage in lawful protest is recognised by the *ASIO Act 1979*, and is of no concern to ASIO, violent political protest is regarded as PMV and is a security concern.

Assessments are used by police and other authorities to determine security requirements and to allocate resources appropriate to the level of threat identified in the assessment. Requests for threat assessments from State and Commonwealth agencies are co-ordinated by the Protective Security Co-ordination Centre (PSCC), which tasks ASIO with compiling an assessment. ASIO does this based on information it possesses and information provided to it by police and other relevant agencies.

The Need for a National Threat Assessment Centre (NTAC)

As the table indicates, the number of threat assessments issued by ASIO has increased over the last couple of years, which ASIO attributes mainly to the 'War on Terrorism'.² There has been a significant increase in the number of assessments for both Australian and visiting dignitaries, and demonstrations.

Subject of assessment	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Visiting dignitaries	106	107	131	79	237
Australian dignitaries	238	347	552	503	834
Australian interests	-	-	-	122	176
Protective security	39	30	34	27	25
Demonstration notifications	71	63	48	100	193
Diplomatic premises	113	208	164	77	108
Other Threat Assessments	54	84	75	51	66
Olympic Games 2000	-	46	342	354	-
CHOGM	-	-	-	29	147
Total	621	885	1346	1342	1786

Source: ASIO Report to Parliament 2001-02

Surprisingly, despite this upward trend and the ongoing heightened state of security, ASIO remarked in its 2001-02 Report to Parliament that, 'we expect the number of Threat Assessments to drop back in 2002-03'.³

A fact sheet distributed by the Attorney-General's Department notes that 'ASIO produced more than 2000 assessments in the 2002-03 financial year'⁴, which is more in keeping with the trend indicated in the table, and in line with what one might expect in the current climate.

ASIO also notes that after many years of operating in a threat level range of *very low to low*, the normal range is now *low to medium*, with levels occasionally reaching *high*.⁵

The problem in the past has been that although technically ASIO has provided threat assessment advice on a 24-hour basis, this service has been provided by a limited number of staff, who, in addition to a full day's routine work, may have had to work long into the night to meet the increased demand for threat assessments. Rather than operating on an ad hoc overtime basis, it makes much more sense to maintain

a larger dedicated 24-hour unit staffed with members of different security-related agencies, particularly if the demand for threat assessments continues at the current rate, or increases.

In launching the NTAC on 17 October 2003, the Attorney-General, The Hon. Philip Ruddock, emphasised that the work of the NTAC is not new, but rather that the Centre represents a 'refinement' of existing arrangements. As such, the NTAC will centralise

the existing threat assessment function already within ASIO, by housing representatives of those agencies with security responsibilities under the one roof. This should enable a faster, better co-ordinated sharing of information amongst local agencies and with overseas counterparts at any time of the day or night, and potentially enable threat assessments to be issued more quickly.

Importantly, its 24-hour operation will facilitate liaison with overseas agencies the normal business hours of which often correspond to night-time in Australia.

Mr Ruddock also quite rightly corrected the media's perception of the NTAC as another intelligence body, describing it instead as a 'centre' within ASIO. He also claimed that the creation of the NTAC is not indicative of a shortcoming in the existing process,

and implied that the demand for quality threat assessment information has simply outgrown the agency's capacity to provide it under the current arrangements.

The intention that the NTAC's assessments will be 'used by DFAT in preparing its travel advisories'⁶ and that the NTAC's staff will include DFAT officers is perhaps significant in that it may be designed to avoid a repeat of the confusion that appears to have surrounded threat assessments and travel advisories around the time of the Bali bombing. The NTAC's assessments will also be used as a basis for determining the national terrorism alert level.

Interestingly, realising that it lacked a centre 'where agencies with responsibilities in the national security area could access, share, analyse and disseminate information and intelligence',⁷ Canada established a similar centre to the NTAC at much the same time. Canada's Integrated National Security Assessment Centre (INSAC) was launched by the Solicitor General on 16 October 2003 and is designed to enhance the capability of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to advise the Government on threats to national security. In addition to CSIS, where the INSAC is located, the Centre will involve members of customs, defence, police, transport and communications bodies, critical infrastructure agencies, Foreign Affairs, immigration and the Solicitor General's office.

Staffing the NTAC

The NTAC's staff will primarily comprise ASIO officers, but will also include staff seconded from:

- Australian Federal Police (AFP)
- Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS)
- Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO)
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)
- Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS), and
- Office of National Assessments (ONA).

Mr Ruddock has indicated that the future participation of other agencies may be considered if deemed appropriate. It is however surprising that the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

(DIMIA), the Australian Customs Service (ACS), and the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) are not currently involved, given that each participates, albeit in an indirect sense, in the effort to combat international terrorism.

As these agencies all possess a limited intelligence and/or investigative function, they may well already feed into the process, but if so, this has not been stated by the Government. Indeed, Customs in particular would seem to have as important a role in combating terrorism, and a more direct operational one, than either DOTARS or DFAT, which are primarily policy departments with limited threat assessment functions.

Presumably the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) and the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation (DIGO) would feed any relevant information into the threat assessment process via DIO.

The Centre will eventually be staffed by about forty people directly involved in the preparation of threat assessments, assisted by a number of support staff. The NTAC commenced operation upon its launch, and ASIO advertised the position of Manager NTAC and various shift-work positions of Analysts and Threats Production Officers in late October 2003. However, the Centre is not expected to be operating on a full-time '24/7' basis until 1 June 2004.⁸

Funding the NTAC

According to the Attorney-General, the NTAC will be funded at a total cost of \$51.4 million over five years, commencing in the current 2003–04 Budget. It is unknown whether or not running costs are to be apportioned between the different agencies involved, and it is not clear who will pay the salaries of seconded staff.

Conclusion

The creation of the NTAC is a positive move, because it means that the production of threat assessments will now be undertaken on an ongoing basis by a specialist and diverse team of analysts dedicated full time to monitoring, gathering, assessing and disseminating a variety of information relevant to Australia's national security.

There would appear, however, to be scope for involving other agencies not currently included in the NTAC,

and, given the significant input to counter-terrorism efforts by the omitted agencies noted, it may well be that circumstances demand their inclusion sooner rather than later. The addition to the NTAC of Customs and DIMIA in particular, would seem only sensible.

Nonetheless, it is likely that recipients of ASIO's threat assessments will now benefit from having access to a properly staffed, centralised, round-the-clock point of liaison on security threats to Australia. This in turn should further strengthen the Government's ability to pre-empt future threats to the safety and security of Australia and its interests overseas.

1. ASIO Report to Parliament 2001–2002, p. 21.
2. *ibid.*, p. 22.
3. *ibid.*
4. 'New Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Centre Launched', press release, Attorney-General's Department, 17 October 2003.
5. ASIO Report to Parliament 2001–2002, p. 21.
6. 'New Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Centre Launched', *op. cit.*
7. 'Solicitor General Announces New Integrated National Security Assessment Centre (INSAC)', press release, Department of the Solicitor General of Canada, 16 October 2003, http://www.sgc.gc.ca/publication/s/news/20031016_e.asp (17 November 2003).
8. 'New Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Centre Launched', *op. cit.*

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