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BACKGROUNDER

Update: Implementing the Wheeler Report in Australia

The Government of Australia has accepted in principle all of the recommendations tabled in the Wheeler Review into airport security and policing. As of January 2006, it is now in varying stages of implementing virtually all of the core proposals, calling the process "Project Jupiter."

Indeed, the government is actually going beyond the Wheeler recommendations in some major respects. Not only is Australia implementing an array of national and regional initiatives for increasing security at Australia's major airports; to complement these, it is also aggressively launching a number of international initiatives to monitor and build security capacity at foreign airports with vital links to Australia's aviation system, seeing this as a critical, integral and strategic third-pillar of its domestic aviation security platform.

1.0 NATIONAL INITIATIVES: STRENGTHENING AIRPORT POLICING

Immediately following release of the Wheeler Report, the Howard/Vaile coalition government moved to redefine the relationship between security officials and airport operations in Australia by significantly increasing the role of policing in aviation security. In late September 2005, the government shifted primary responsibility for airport security and counter-terrorism first response to a single organisation – the Australian Federal Police (AFP) – thus fulfilling one of the main recommendations of the Wheeler Review.

The AFP, in turn, introduced and started implementing a new, unified policing model for airport security at each of 11 designated "counter-terrorism first-response" (CTFR) airports, representing Australia's main airports.[1] The model greatly expands the number of leading roles for policing in airport security; combines these with a 24/7 permanent presence of community policing at airports; and, seeks to integrate federal, state and territorial policing throughout the Australian aviation system.

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1 The eleven designated "counter-terrorism first-response" (CTFR) airports are Cairns, Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide, Perth, Darwin and Alice Springs.

Thus far, the AFP has fully implemented only the first step in this process by appointing special police commanders to exercise centralised command and control of policing and counter-terrorism functions at each of the 11 CTFR airports. Police commanders were selected from a variety of jurisdictions across the country, given a ten-day training program at the AFP's Barton College to help them get to know the systems that operate within the aviation security industry and, then, were deployed at Australia's main airports by the end of January 2006.

Each police commander oversees the planning and security at their respective airport, determining mid- to long-term operational priorities and resource needs, and coordinating security response mechanisms. They are also in overall command of community policing at airports and oversee broader liaison with industry and other stakeholders.

The 11 commanders will lead police units made up of federal, state and territory police that are permanently based at airports and provided with the authority and resources needed to deal firmly with both community policing and counter-terrorism. These police units will operate under the central command of the AFP in order to ensure a coordinated approach to investigations, community policing, counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering.

When 'Project Jupiter' is fully implemented, the number of new policing staff involved directly in aviation security throughout Australia will number between 1100 and 1200 staff.

To better manage this substantial expansion in airport policing, the Howard/Vaile government has established a new, dedicated portfolio within the AFP – the National Manager, Aviation. The Government will also provide AUD $1.6 million over four years to support the establishment within the Department of Transport and Regional Services of an "Office of the Inspector of Transport

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Security." This Inspector will investigate major incidents and systemic transport security weaknesses, making recommendations to ensure security vulnerabilities are identified and addressed (similar to the Transportation Safety Board).

2.0 NATIONAL INITIATIVES: STRENGTHENING AIRPORT SECURITY

While its focus to date has been upon policing, the Australian Government is also working towards implementing other elements of the Wheeler Report that are designed to strengthen the intelligence and investigative capacity of the country's main airports.

Initiatives here include the establishment of a dedicated joint "Airport Intelligence Group" at each CTFR airport. Their role is to gather, interpret and disseminate intelligence relating to both criminal activity and security at each of the airports. The groups will also share intelligence with and provide input for other aviation security programs, helping to determine security priorities and risk-based resource allocations and, in the case of the country's Air Security Officers program, helping determine what flights should be covered. Airport Intelligence Groups are to be established on a permanent basis at all 11 CTFR airports; and, are meant to comprise members from the AFP, State and Territory Police, the Australian Customs Service, Australian Security Intelligence Organization, and other government departments on an as-needed basis. Progress in forming these groups has been slow, however, because achieving agreement amongst all intended participants has proven difficult. At the moment, only AFP and the Customs Service have formally committed personnel to this initiative; and, only at the country's largest international airports in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, and Adelaide. Negotiations continue amongst the AFP and other intended participants.

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Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. These Teams will involve 66 staff nationally and comprise AFP and State Police officers as well as Customs staff in fighting the organised and serious crime identified in the Wheeler Report as presenting a simultaneous threat to the security of airport operations.[2]

In addition, "Counter Terrorism First Response (CTFR) Teams" that were already in place at major Australian airports before the Wheeler Review will now enjoy significantly enhanced powers. The teams will be provided with resources to increase patrols at CTFR airports and to convene strategic groupings of airport security experts in fields such as protection, explosives detection and bomb appraisal. Their work is to provide a centralized point of contact for all information and advice regarding counter-terrorism and aviation security issues, including potential risks and threats, in order to ensure nationally -consistent operations for responding quickly to security threats using proactive, preventative, risk- and intelligence-based measures.

To further buttress the security of airport operations, the Australian Government has committed to improving screening responsiveness and accuracy through major investments in explosives detection systems and intelligence. Investments are now being made in the latest technology for bomb appraisal to help officers more quickly determine whether an object is a legitimate bomb, which will help to reduce the time, inconvenience and threat posed to airports operators and the travelling public. Australia has also pledged to expand capacity at the AFP's world-renown bomb data centre to not only deal with explosive materials but also with chemical, biological and radiological material.

The Howard/Vaile Government has budgeted AUD $61.7 million over four years for the phased implementation of automated border processing, as well as $74.6 million for implementation of 80 "SmartGate" kiosks that use facial biometrics for processing passengers. The government is also undertaking progressive introduction of ePassports (passports which include an electronic image of the passport holder).

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2 Notable successes have already been recorded. Within one month of beginning operations, the new Airport Investigation Team at Sydney Airport made its first arrests. Three men, all Qantas employees, were arrested in late November 2005 on charges related to the distribution of narcotics within Sydney airports.

The country is experiencing significant delays, however, in implementing its new regime for Restricted Area Access / Aviation Security Identification Card (ASIC). The background checking process required to obtain and hold an ASIC is being tightened and centralised in the Attorney-General's Department, and work is underway to harmonise these with maritime cards. Regulations have been adopted obliging CTFR airports to ensure that all those entitled to enter airside secure areas in connection with work responsibilities are screened each time they enter and leave the secure area. However implementing the ASIC regime for regional airports is taking far longer than expected because smaller sites lack sufficient resources and expertise to comply on schedule. The Government has therefore agreed to extend the deadline to display ASICs for pilots and employees to 31 March 2006.

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3.0 REGIONAL INITIATIVES

Given the emphasis placed on these sites in the Wheeler Report and their importance to the Australian way of life, it comes as no surprise that regional airports also loom large in "Project Jupiter" efforts to implement the Wheeler recommendations.

Cornerstone to the effort is the Federal Government's AUD $35 million "Regional Airport Funding Program," designed to promote tighter airport security through wholesale upgrading of regional airport facilities. A risk assessment of airports is being undertaken and the funding will be used to enhance basic physical security. Where required, this will include funding for improvements in everything from high-tech back-to-base alarm systems, code access and CCTV systems to locks, lighting, fencing and gates to guard service or regular surveillance of key areas within the boundary of the airports.

A total of 147 regional airports are now required to have a security program upgrade approved by the Federal Government under this scheme. Initially the program called for federal funding to be provided on a cost-recovery

basis, wherein regional airports would pay for necessary security upgrades using federal funds, then recoup all monies by passing the costs on to airlines. Public outcry from both sectors was fast and furious, however, prompting the Howard/Vaile coalition government to quickly reconsider the program terms. Presently, airport owners and operators will not be required to match or recover Government funding.

In another major commitment to regional airport security, the Howard/Vaile government is also moving to supplement the aforementioned national CTFR teams with new "Regional Rapid Deployment Teams" for smaller regional airports scattered throughout the country. These will provide counter-terrorism first response through both pre-planned deployment for deterrence and threat-based deployment at very short notice triggered by intelligence indicating an increased threat at particular regional airports. The first deployment operations commenced in January this year and, although presently stationed only at regional airports in south-eastern Australia, are scheduled to be deployed at regional airports throughout the rest of the country in one to two years. Each regional team deploys eight AFP officers, including an explosive bomb appraisal officer and a canine detection team, and is expected to conduct about 50 deployments over the course of a year.

4.0 INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES

The Wheeler report was originally prompted by concerns raised by the media involving allegations that drugs and contraband were not being detected upon arrival or departure at Sydney Airport, including those originating from or destined for international locations. Furthermore, in calling attention to domestic issues of aviation security, the Wheeler Report repeatedly noted that security vulnerabilities exposed through criminal activity could potentially be exploited by terrorists, including those planning and launching attacks from afar.

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From both sets of concerns, the Government of Australia has arrived at the firm conviction that airport security at home is directly enhanced by monitoring and improving airport security in other countries. Combating laxity in foreign airport security has thus been raised to prominence as the vital third-pillar in the Australian strategy to shore up domestic airport security. As an integral part of responding to the Wheeler Report, therefore, the Australian Government has aggressively undertaken a number of bold international initiatives to monitor and build security capacity at foreign airports that are "last ports of call" or stopover points for long-haul flights to Australia from Europe, North America and other parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

Foremost among the government's concerns are airports located in Southeast Asia. As such, Australia is launching a host of initiatives to build the intelligence capabilities and enhance the airport security capacity of Southeast Asian countries. The approach is strategic and risk-based: Given the strong presence and threat emanating from transnational terrorists in Southeast Asia, Australia is moving to strengthen relationships with transport security agencies throughout the region in an effort to strengthen its own capability to combat regional terrorism and mitigate against the risk of attack.

As a starting point, Australia now plans to identify and address the weakest links in security at Asian airports by stationing its own intelligence officers and airport security experts in the region. AFP has recently stationed a roving team of airport security experts in Singapore and Jakarta, Indonesia who will travel widely, regularly and incognito throughout the region with the dedicated purpose of probing, testing and gathering detailed intelligence on holes in security at key airports. For its part, the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) will likewise expand its overseas presence this year, posting new security officers throughout Southeast Asia – three new officers to be based in Jakarta, two in Manila and two Pacific liaison officers. Their task, apparently, is threat assessment.

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At the same time, Australia is also helping its neighbours by significantly expanding the airport security capacity-building assistance that it provides Southeast Asia. Building upon alliances and experiences forged in the wake of the Bali bombing, for instance, Australia is now working with Indonesia and spending AUD $1.3 million to provide training and improve security at Bali's Denpasar airport, which is in breach of international standards. As well, Australia's AFP is now establishing regional intelligence centers in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand that are modeled on its renowned bomb data centre. The Australian Government will also provide AUD $7.6 million over two years to the AFP to work with regional law enforcement agencies to trial the application of biometric technology at key regional transit points, including key airports throughout Southeast Asia. Finally, the Government is providing additional funding of AUD $15.7 million over four years to the AFP to allow expansion of the Air Security Officer Programme to cover priority international destinations – particularly those in Southeast Asia – based on intelligence and risk assessments.

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