



Seminar on "The many faces of resilience in the context of terrorism" by Dr Mark Dechesne, Centre for Regional Knowledge Development, Leiden University, The Hague
23rd August 2013@ RSIS CR 2

Dr Mark Dechesne presented on the many faces of resilience and made the case that experimental social psychology could make positive contributions to the area of study.

He argued that forging social resilience could be considered part of any national counterterrorism policy, and building resilience as part of counterterrorism meant confronting, not the terrorists per se, but rather the terror that terrorists would subject a society to. A resilient society would essentially be one that could not be terrorised.

Resilience, however, meant different things to different people and it could be interpreted in many ways. A comprehensive approach, though, would incorporate five types of resilience: psychological, communal, ideological, political and international.

Psychological resilience would be the ability of a society to mentally protect itself from the effects of terrorism and bounce back after an attack. This type of resilience required a positive view of oneself, a positive outlook towards the future as well as a sense of being in control. Dechesne highlighted how Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan could push on in light of news of fellow soldiers' deaths, demonstrating a strong measure of psychological resilience when they had strong belief in their mission and held steadfast to the fact that they had a key role to play in reaching a specific goal.

Communal resilience referred to a community's ability to withstand a terrorist attack and not fall apart in the aftermath. Dechesne compared and contrasted New York City after the September 11 attacks and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as examples of what a resilient community was – and what was not.

Ideological resilience would be the ability of the community at large to marginalise extremist ideologies and get potential supporters of violent opposition to adopt more moderate ideological stances. Dechesne did however note that a lot more research was needed to understand how to forge this type of resilience. He also said the same of the last two types of resilience, political and international. Political resilience referred to the ability of the government and its opposition and critiques to maintain constructive dialogues with one another despite political disagreements, and international resilience referred to a country's ability to maintain its international reputation while undertaking counterterrorism measures. The Edward Snowden affair, for instance, illustrated the importance of building international resilience in counterterrorism.

The five types of resilience highlighted could be strung together by a common denominator, which Dechesne argued was the presence of a shared identity. When there was a common understanding of who we were and what we stood for as a people, resilience could be easier forged. Such a strong sense of shared identity would be characterised by inclusiveness, plurality, tolerance and equity, all in all contributing to a reduced sense of insecurity.



Building these very characteristics into the framework of a society would lead to the optimal formation of a strong shared identity that could withstand the worst of any terrorist attacks. In conclusion, Dechesne said that future research on resilience should focus on the conditions for optimal identity formation that could act as the buffer against the adverse effects of terrorism.

During the discussion, a participant asked whether there could be a disjoint in endeavours to forge a common identity within a community that should yet also remain open and inclusive. Dechesne responded that there would always be ambiguity and difficulties in reconciling the two; there would definitely be some snags as some people with stronger identities could be less likely to be accepting of others. Another participant asked for some examples of shared identities leading to stronger resilience, to which Dechesne shored up the cases of Thailand and Indonesia. He said that one could argue there was a stronger sense of shared identity in Thailand (barring the Southern provinces) but not in Indonesia which was perhaps a result of its expansive archipelagic geography. For this reason, communities in Indonesia would have greater difficulties bouncing back after a terrorist attack, and was thus less resilient. Another participant asked whether it was necessary for there to be a strong state to enforce resilience. Dechesne responded negatively, arguing that, in general, the stronger the state (including its military), the weaker the community unity and sense of shared identity.