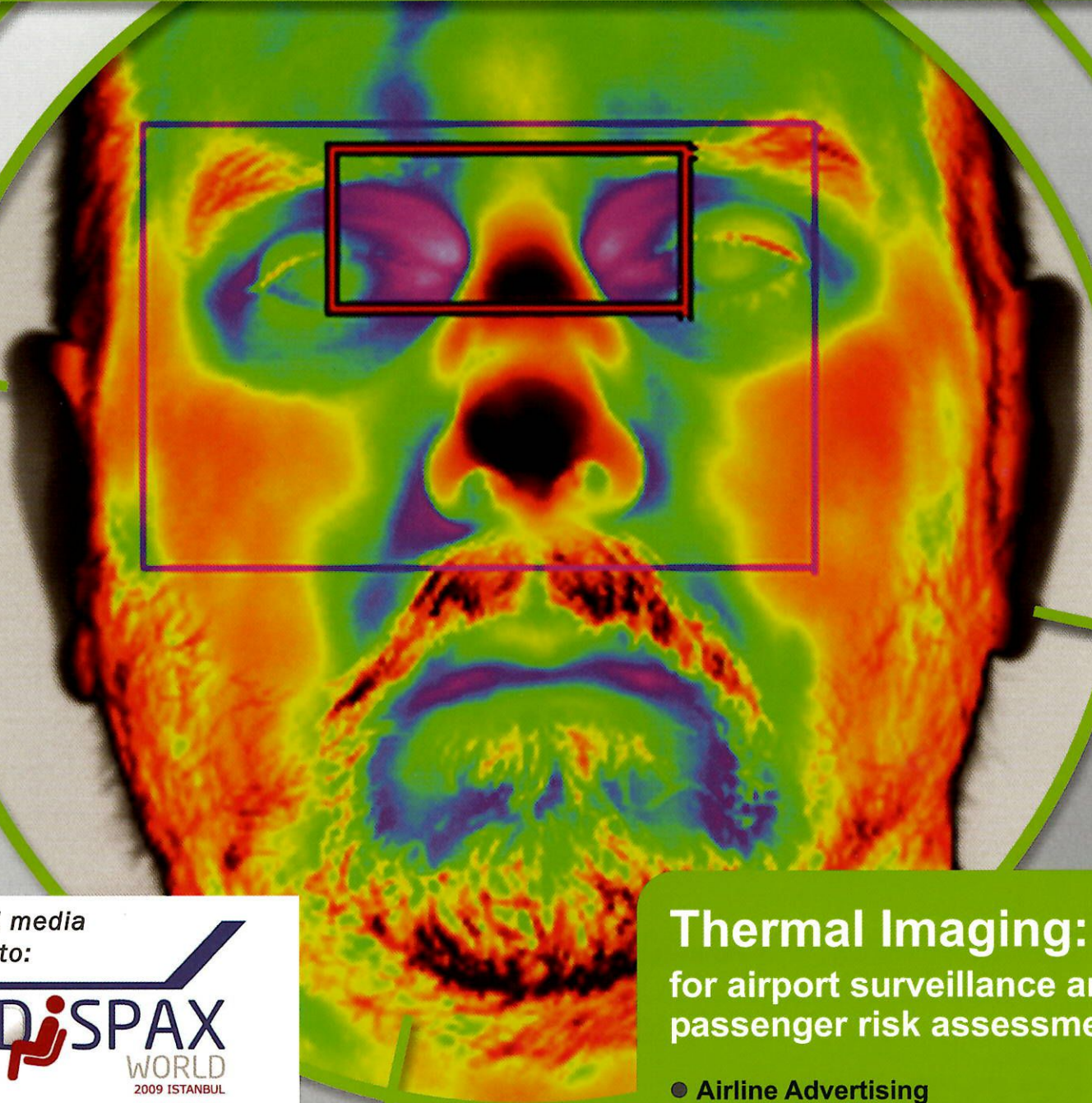


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America Takes the Lead: time for change?

by Philip Baum



Last year, two events in the Asia-Pacific region demonstrated the inherent weaknesses with our current approach to aviation security. In February, in New Zealand, there was an attempted hijacking of a domestic flight by an armed woman who had to use little in the way of initiative to infiltrate her weapons onto the aircraft – there simply was no screening operation in Blenheim.

In March, in China, a China Southern flight was the subject of an attempted act of sabotage through the use of an improvised incendiary device. Again, the flight was a domestic operation. And the attack, supposedly carried out by ETIM, was yet another perfect of example of the fact that “next time it will be different”.

In both cases, it was the aircrew who saved the day.

There was little international outcry as a result of either of the two incidents and many of those working within the industry, let alone the general public, may well be oblivious to the details of the cases. Aviation incidents in China and New Zealand rarely make the international headlines.

It is often stated that we are reactive. Most of the security measures we see in place today around the world are a result of specific “successful” attacks impacting the industry or plots that may not have reached fruition being identified by the intelligence agencies. The introduction of mass screening at airport checkpoints by the use of archway metal detectors and X-ray machines was a result of the hijacking of aircraft both from the United States to Cuba and from Cuba to the United States in the 1960s and 70s. The drive towards baggage reconciliation and the introduction of hold baggage screening on all international flights was fuelled by the

1988 Lockerbie disaster, despite the fact that the suitcase in which the improvised explosive device was concealed was actually screened by X-ray in any case. The terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 resulted in, at huge expense, enhanced flight deck doors and a reappraisal of prohibited items lists, to include bans on penknives and metal cutlery knives. Richard Reid’s attempt to destroy an American Airlines jetliner with a shoe bomb three months later prompted the removal and scanning of footwear at checkpoints, whilst the alleged liquid explosive plot of 10th August 2006 saw the focus shift towards liquids, aerosols and gels.

If one were to try and establish the common theme between the aforementioned cases, it would be that they all involved flights within, to or from the United States of America.

Despite the significant number of incidents that have taken, and continue to take place around the globe, little changes unless Uncle Sam is in the crosshairs. On one hand, one could argue that this is a positive initiative by the United States to try to prevent repetitions. On the other hand, it demonstrates that we do not really live in a global village as far as aviation is concerned. Let’s face it, most of the world follows the American lead. Speakers from the Transportation Security Administration are “A” List guests at conferences; technology manufacturers often stake their all in gaining TSA certification; TSA inspections are looked forward to with trepidation overseas and, the US influence is considerable, to put it mildly, at international organisations...especially ICAO.

This says more about America’s global economic power than it does about the quality of security served up in the USA. After all, the very same people and entities around the world that extol platitudes to

their American counterparts privately laugh at the inadequate security standards that exist around much of the United States. The international community seems to have resolved to “do as they say, not as they do”.

It’s the front line that is my greatest concern. In certain areas, especially with regard to the research and development of new technologies, and the testing thereof, America truly is a global leader. Yet, however one dresses them up, those operating the checkpoints around the USA do little to inspire confidence and could learn a thing or two from their counterparts in Europe, Asia and Australasia.

The fault does not lie exclusively with the American authorities. It’s also about time that the international community started to wield its own axe by better auditing of US operations and highlighting their own best practices. Some states, especially those in western Europe, do so, but aviation security is not a NATO service; it is a global requirement.

Whilst we all want a degree of harmonisation of procedures, at least to the extent that the travelling public know what is expected of them when they check-in, we also want a generous helping of common sense and initiative. We also need a reality check.

For example, why did it take the 2006 trans-Atlantic plot to down airliners using liquid explosives to bring about restrictions as to the quantity of liquids, aerosols and gels passengers can carry into the aircraft cabin? Was the 2006 plot a new threat? Hardly; the very first confirmed act of aerial sabotage in 1933 involved nitro-glycerine!

More recently, of course, was the downing of Korean Air Lines flight 858, en route from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok in 1988. The perpetrators used both plastic and liquid explosives in their device. All 115 passengers and crew on board died. And,

in 1994, Ramzi Yousef's so-called "X-ray Proof Bomb" centred on the use of liquid explosives concealed in a bottle of contact lens solution. One passenger was killed when the device was tested on a Philippine Airlines flight operating from Manila to Tokyo via Cebu. Yet, despite these incidents, where was the subsequent global ban or restriction on the carriage of liquids into the aircraft cabin?

When David Mark Robinson boarded a Qantas flight bound for Launceston, Tasmania, in 2003, nobody identified the wooden stakes with which he was about to attempt to gain control of the aircraft and fly it into Cradle Mountain in a suicidal bid. Where was the global response? Had the same incident occurred, especially if it had been successful, in the United States, I would hazard a guess that our faith in the archway metal detector would not be so resolute.

And when it comes to suicidal terrorists, one would have thought that 9/11 was the first time an individual could knowingly kill themselves in-flight. Aside from those few incidents in which desperate passengers took out large life insurance policies so that their families could benefit after they had killed themselves on board, there were

also suicidal terrorists before the mass attacks on the United States.

Notably, the bombing of an Alas Chiricanas Embraer 110 on a domestic flight from Colón to Panama City in 1994 is alleged to be an early example of the willingness of an individual to knowingly destroy an aircraft whilst travelling as a passenger on board. It is believed that Jamal Lya carried a device, where Semtex was the main charge, in a briefcase and detonated it on his lap. Later the same year, it is believed that the hijackers of an Air France plane intended to fly the aircraft into either the Eiffel Tower or elsewhere within Paris' city centre. Yet these incidents were in Panama, Algeria and France - no need, it would seem, for a change in aviation security policy.

Post-9/11 there have been a number of significant attacks against aviation. Few can rival the August 2004 downing of two Russian aircraft by Chechen Black Widows. Simultaneous attacks, as on 9/11, yet using a single terrorist on each flight. In Thailand, they might say, "Same, Same, but Different". And it will be different next time too, just as we saw in last year's attempt by ETIM to destroy the China Southern flight.

Given that aviation is, by nature, a global industry, our responses should be global too. There will be many states, especially in the developing world, that will need support and aid to raise their standards. Thanks to ICAO and certain individual states, including the USA, this is often possible. Yet when it comes to determining best practice, we ought not be too blinkered.

Much of what we do at the screening point is deterrence. Accordingly, image is all important. So too is the confidence of the staff to counter the threat. With this in mind, not all the solutions lie in the United States. Russian willingness to deploy alternative technologies and be proactive at countering emerging threats, Australian and New Zealand's investment in aircrew training programmes, Israel's sky marshal programme and Hong Kong-style screeners who are dressed to impress, all have their place.

As I write the ICAO Avsec Panel is meeting to deliberate the next set of changes to Annex 17. Let's hope that some of the recommendations that shape our global policy come from global best practice and are not simply America's wish list based on its own experience. After all, it's time for change!

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