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BLUE SKIES THINKING: time to turn a concept into reality

by Philip Baum

I have participated in a number of forward-thinking national symposia over the years, but there has been a notable lack of truly innovative thinking regarding aviation security on a global scale. This is to be expected as it is hard for governments and regulators to challenge the efficacy of the status quo without calling into question their own roles and existing methodologies.

This has been frustrating for manufacturers who have often designed solutions to combat threats only to be told that governments don't want to test or trial the technologies as, by doing so, they are indicating a fallibility of their current system. For the operators and consultants, it has resulted in their constant criticism of a bolt-it-on approach, whereby each new plot or incident results in a raft of new security measures without the old ones being dispensed with.

It would certainly be a challenge for ICAO to discuss whether or not ICAO ought to have responsibility for aviation security legislation and how many airports are going to want to call into question the effectiveness of metal detectors and X-ray machines?

Individual States have organised 'in-house' meetings where facilitators have tried to encourage 'out of the box' thinking, yet many often limit deliberations to addressing one threat (i.e. the terrorist threat) or one aspect of the security web (i.e. passenger screening).

I have long thought that the industry needs to rid itself of the shackles of existing legislation, currently deployed technologies and long-standing operational practice and start to design a utopian view of aviation security...starting with a blank sheet of paper. At least we would know what we were aiming for. Colleagues agreed, but who would sponsor such a venture which could churn out results that governments, regulators and participants' employers might resent? It also needed to be an event open to all, with no participation fee, to have any credibility.

And so it was, about two years ago, that I mooted my idea to Sidney Chau, the Executive Director of AVSECO (Hong Kong), being an organisation within the industry that I knew might be able to provide the resources to host such an event without placing too many limitations on the participants. The findings would be the findings, love them or hate them. And the findings would be on public record too.

Fortunately, Sidney Chau liked the idea of bringing the industry together in this way and he asked me to put some flesh on the bones of the project, together with Tony Blackiston, a senior member of his AVSECO team. We spent a few days developing the concept and returned with a Proposal which was approved. AVSECO has, once again, demonstrated that it is not only a champion of excellence in aviation security services within Hong Kong, but that it is also prepared to go the extra mile in order to stage events, and publish materials, to enhance aviation security on the global stage.

As this issue of ASI goes to press, Blue Skies Thinking is about to become a reality. In less than a month, individuals employed by regulators, airports, airlines, manufacturers, and the security agencies, alongside freelance consultants, will gather in Hong Kong and start their deliberations. Divided into groups, they will consider what legislation is needed, which

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technologies ought to be deployed and how airports and airlines can best operate in order to prevent acts of unlawful interference with civil aviation.

The groups will be facilitated by Andrew McClumpha of LeighFisher, together with Norman Shanks (NSAI) and Matthew Finn (Augmentiq), both of whom are members of this journal's Editorial Advisory Board, all of whom will be assisted by Katharine Ng of OneCrew. These respected industry professionals will steer discussions to reach conclusions which will be presented at the plenary session. Thereafter, the findings will be further examined and the output will be published by AVSECO later in the year so that the ideas and concepts are available to the industry as a whole for consideration.

The extent to which it will work will depend on the input of the participants and their willingness to set aside any preconceived ideas that they may have as to the way ahead and their ability to distance themselves from their employer's official positions and speak freely. It's a major challenge, but an exciting one.

Recent events, such as the Boston Marathon bombing and the Woolwich terrorist attack in which a soldier was murdered on the streets of London, have demonstrated the evolving terrorist threat. Meanwhile, the media is awash with stories pertaining to the actions of the criminal underworld and the psychologically disturbed. The threats we designed the current aviation security system to address have not disappeared, but they are not as prevalent as the emerging ones.

I am hopeful that the participants at the Blue Skies Thinking Workshop will find a creative, common sense-based way of responding to the challenges and I look forward to reporting some of the ideas generated in future issues of this journal. In the meantime, I would like to thank the facilitators, none of whom are being paid, for their input, Sidney Chau, Tony Blackiston and the AVSECO team, without whom this venture would never have got off the ground, and, most importantly, all those who have registered to participate and who have sourced finance for their flights to, and accommodation in, Hong Kong. ■

