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Embassy Security: From the Outside In

William Young

We must begin with an understanding that it is not possible to mitigate all risk. When establishing a diplomatic presence in a high-threat area, we must ask whether the mission is essential, whether the means available to protect the embassy or consulate are commensurate with the level of threat, and whether housing areas and routes to and from the diplomatic offices are likely to be collateral targets for attack.

First and foremost among all security considerations for missions abroad is the amount and type of support provided by the host government. Without local government support, it might not be possible to secure *any* civilian facility. The host government should be willing to provide a visible military presence outside the embassy or consulate as a deterrent to groups contemplating a protest or attack. It should be willing to use barriers to close roads or limit movement around the facility, to increase the degree of “setback” from the street. This will make it more difficult for attack planners to evaluate their target. Attackers often spend days

or weeks casing buildings, studying the daily movement of people in the target area, and evaluating the security procedures in place at target compounds. Not being able to see inside the embassy or consulate compound increases the level of uncertainty for them and could convince them not to attack. The host government, through its police force, intelligence service, or local militias, should share information gained from its penetrations of terrorist groups and fringe elements. Such an arrangement would help increase the embassy’s level of awareness, strengthen the security posture of diplomatic facilities, and ensure the safety of diplomatic officers as they move through the city.

Building on the security foundation provided by the host government, the second most important consideration when developing a strategy to protect a diplomatic mission in a high-threat area are the methods for acquiring knowledge of what’s happening outside the embassy’s fence line, on the streets in the surrounding neighborhoods. People are creatures of habit and move with purpose to and from their homes and workplaces. Shop owners and

neighbors know what their streets look like on a normal day, and they likely know to stay home on the day of a protest or a terrorist attack. They can often tell when strangers are present and could provide critical information in advance of an attack or as groups mobilize for a protest. This type of information can be collected daily by roving patrols in embassy neighborhoods and by reliable local investigators who have established relationships with the area's population. The embassy's Regional Security Office must have a mechanism to quickly process this disjointed information and disseminate it to the chief of mission and other section chiefs in time for embassy staff to set emergency action plans in motion. Many of these offices already have regular contact with the local police and could even request daily situation reports.

The third consideration in implementing an effective security strategy is the actual structure of the buildings and the layout of the diplomatic compound. Is it an "Inman"-style building with blast-resistant walls and glass, or is it a former house that was the

only property available? Are buildings significantly set back from the street? Are housing structures adequately "hardened" against attack? Building a new embassy or consulate can take years. In high-threat areas where the United States must work immediately with a new local government, there is no time to wait for construction crews to arrive. In the meantime, it will be important to collaborate with the host government to build up the security outside the temporary embassy while guards, locks, gates, and procedures are put in place to establish access control and protect spaces inside the compound. If the threat of a large military-style attack is credible, additional protective security inside the diplomatic compound will also be necessary. It is important to remember that the host government has an investment in ensuring the safety of the security forces it provides to protect the U.S. diplomatic presence.

The Marine Corps Embassy Security Group is another line of defense for diplomatic compounds. A small detachment of U.S. Marines is often present to protect documents and information systems, but the protocol governing their ability to engage with attackers outside the chancery and other main buildings is limited. Going forward, the protocol governing what the Marines are allowed to do in the event of an attack needs to be examined. Their purpose in an attack is to secure the embassy and its classified paper and electronic storage systems; they do not have the mandate to engage with attackers and are limited to designated areas on the embassy or consulate grounds. The physical security measures in place at the mission should be designed with this in mind. Their primary purpose is to deter.

Technology can help. Cameras with pattern-recognition software positioned around the embassy to monitor the streets can show what those streets look like on a normal day and what



AP IMAGES/MOHAMMAD HANNON

Empty bullet casings litter the ground in the aftermath of the September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

they look like on a day when there may be protests or an attack. They can capture protesters mobilizing or attackers prepositioning themselves before an assault. Similarly, predictive analytics can be applied to social media collected from Facebook, Twitter, and other accounts to determine when crowds might form or when an attack is being planned. Although social media might not reveal the identities of attackers, it could bring together disparate pieces of information and allow analysts to form a cohesive picture of the threat that, when analyzed and linked, provides early warning. For example, local residents and shop owners know by word of mouth not to be on the street or keep their shops open after lunch tomorrow. They talk about it in face-to-face meetings or on their Facebook pages. The embassy will not know why the shops will be closed, but it can use this indication of unrest to probe further within the community by asking its contacts. The intensity of the language used on blogs and in Twitter feeds could also provide an early warning of public sentiment on the same day. This type of foresight can help clarify the nature of the threat, providing an opportunity for diplomatic security officers to implement the appropriate measures to deter or defend against the threat. After the embassy shares this information with the local government, police or military forces could intervene and prevent a nascent mob from growing and getting too close to the embassy. Once a mob forms or terrorists are in place, it is much more difficult to stop or even limit the escalation of violence.

Technology can help even after a protest or assault threatens to breach the outer wall of the embassy or the chancery. Long Range Acoustic Devices configured and placed appropriately, either around the outside of the embassy or inside the compound but outside the main buildings, are a nonlethal way to deter attacks, prevent dam-

age, and save lives. The same technology can be configured for the bottom of armored vehicles to protect embassy officers in transit. This version of the device, known as SoundBarrier, is the equivalent of standing behind a jet engine on takeoff. Crowds attacking an embassy car or trying to breach a perimeter wall would be driven back by the sound, but those inside the vehicle would be unaffected because the sound is emitted only in an outward direction. Lower-tech tools can also play a role, particularly in new or makeshift facilities. For example, wire mesh screening could be installed above the embassy compound to protect against overhead threats and rocket blasts, and plywood could be placed in unprotected windows to shield against glass and flying debris after an explosion. There are many similar low-cost measures that can be used at temporary or new, makeshift facilities where a diplomatic presence is required before proper security can be put in place.

All of the measures discussed here can improve the security and the ability of diplomats to function in a high-threat or otherwise hostile environment, although no amount of security short of the type of military presence found in an actual war zone can defend against a large, well-armed terrorist attack. There are no guarantees under any scenario that security can be 100 percent. When entering a high-threat area, diplomats and those who support them agree to accept some degree of risk. As mentioned earlier, the best approach is to weigh the importance of the mission against how much of the risk can be mitigated. One of the best ways to lower the level of risk is to focus on shaping the way the local population and would-be protesters and attackers view the embassy, its staff, and their movements. The goal is to create enough of a deterrent posture to convince attackers that the costs of violence are too high. ■

About This Perspective

U.S. embassies around the world shored up security in the wake of the September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, but policymakers have questioned whether security has been adequate at diplomatic compounds in the first place. Going forward, the security plan for the U.S. diplomatic presence abroad must include well-developed strategies to both detect and prevent an assault like the one in Libya before it occurs.

This Perspective was commissioned by the Intelligence Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD). NSRD conducts research and analysis on defense and national security topics for the U.S. and allied defense, foreign policy, homeland security, and intelligence communities and foundations and other nongovernmental organizations that support defense and national security analysis.

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