



GLOBAL RICOCHET: AMERICA'S MASS SHOOTINGS ARE A SECURITY PROBLEM FOR AUSTRALIA

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SYNOPSIS

Mass shootings in the United States are a critical security issue due to their increasing frequency and sophistication, and Australia must take steps to help its close ally stem the violence by leveraging its diplomatic relations. Although not unique to the US, mass shootings are a distinctly American problem – albeit one that carries international implications, ranging from copycat offenders, to tactical innovation that can be generally applied in soft target attacks. Looking ahead, American efforts to address the complex global challenges of the 21st century may be adversely affected if it is grappling with internal security issues. By extension, this problem stands to affect its close partners like Australia, whose own global interests are aligned with those of the US. Both America and its allies must recognise that malignant domestic gun violence may ultimately present serious strategic complications.

ACTIVE SITUATION

Mass shootings are officially termed *active shooter events*, [defined](#) by the US Department of Homeland Security as armed individuals “engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area...[with] no pattern or method to their selection of victims.” Since 2009, the

Federal Bureau of Investigation has documented a [sharp increase](#) in the frequency and lethality of active shooter events. Recent high-profile attacks have targeted public servants in California (December 2015), nightclub patrons in Florida (June 2016), and police officers in Texas and Louisiana (July 2016).

American political and legislative entities have repeatedly failed to address the root causes of the mass shooting problem. Discussions about mental health care and [intelligence-led policing](#) are useful, but the core issue is the near ubiquity of firearms in American society, a result of constitutionally-ingrained rights. Both Australia and the United Kingdom enacted strict firearm legislation following high-profile mass shootings in the 1990s, which resulted in the [effective elimination](#) of this type of violence. President Barack Obama, noting these specific case studies, made an [emotional plea](#) for gun law reform following the massacre of 26 children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, yet no decisive action was taken by Congress. Even after 50 people were killed in the June 2016 attack on a gay nightclub in Orlando, the highest fatality count of a US active shooter event to date, Congress [did not pass laws](#) prohibiting individuals on the terrorism watch list from obtaining firearms.

The US will continue to grapple with the uneven balance of individual rights and wider social wellbeing and requires the application of external political pressure. In other words, America's global allies should consider intervening in the gun control debate through diplomatic lobbying. This intervention could be based on three key tenets: citizen wellbeing, tactical interference, and strategic stability.

RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

At a base level, states have a duty of care to their expatriate citizens who may unwittingly be caught up in an active shooter incident. For example, Australian students were in close proximity to attacks on [Virginia Tech](#) (2007) and [Umpqua Community College](#) (2015). Accordingly, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade flags mass shootings as a [security concern for travellers](#), and advises Australians living in the US to "familiarise yourself with emergency evacuation and 'active shooter' drills."

The high frequency of mass shootings in the United States also presents a heightened risk of mimicked attacks elsewhere in the world. Mass shootings trigger a [contagion effect](#), whereby a high-profile attack produces 'copycat' violence in the following days and weeks, and the effect has transferred across national and cultural boundaries. For example, the 1999 Columbine High School attack established a 'cultural script' for school shootings, [according to sociologist Ralph Larkin](#), which

has been subsequently referenced – or outright imitated – by active shooters in Germany, Finland and Canada. For example, the perpetrator of a July 2016 mass shooting in Munich was [fascinated](#) by a 2009 Columbine copycat attack in Germany, along with other high-profile incidents in the US.

SHUT DOWN THE WORKSHOP

Due to the high number of mass shootings that are successfully carried out in the US, it can be viewed as a proving ground for the deadly efficacy of active shooter-type tactics, whether employed by unaffiliated individuals, or attackers with links to a terrorist organisation. Although Islamist groups have previously carried out mass casualty firearm attacks on soft targets in Kenya (2013) and India (2011), the methodology found increased favour with Islamic State and its franchisees during 2015-16. As Clint Watts at the Foreign Policy Research Institute [has observed](#), “Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and now Orlando show how successful terror attacks breed even more terror attacks as the results of spectacular assaults incentivize additional waves of violence.”

Active shooters in the US have also demonstrated tactical innovation in some instances, which may serve as a blueprint for enhancing the attack method’s lethality when imitated by others. For example, before opening fire at a Colorado cinema in July 2012, the shooter [rigged his apartment with explosives](#) – albeit unsuccessfully – to distract law enforcement and emergency personnel, and his black body armour confused police responders, who initially [mistook the shooter](#) for a law enforcement officer. And the [multiple vehicle-based attacks](#) that occurred in 2015-16, where shooters fired from a car at pedestrians, drivers and police facilities, serve as a proof-of-concept for attacks where the shooter is highly mobile and equipped with a basic degree of cover and concealment. Cars themselves have also been weaponised by active shooters, such as the 2014 attack in Isla Vista, California, where the shooter ran down several pedestrians, and also the July 2016 truck attack in Nice, France.

STRATEGIC CONCERNS

At a strategic level, the issue of unchecked gun violence may present issues for the United States’ global standing. For example, a [report](#) by the Chinese Government, *Human Rights Record of the United States in 2015*, noted the high frequency of US mass shootings and declared, “Citizen’s right of life (sic) could not be guaranteed with the rampant use of guns.” Although the Chinese Government report effectively amounts propaganda, the statement indicates a global perception that US society has an unhealthy relationship with firearms. If the US is to maintain its primacy and instrumental

involvement in global security, its own internal security issues may be detrimental to its legitimacy on the international stage.

Furthermore, given the highly complex range of global security issues that the US and its partners will continue to face, US domestic security issues must not reach a point where they could potentially impair US foreign policy. Continued mass shootings would be particularly troubling during any period of major inter-state crisis or conflict, as they would further traumatise and demoralise the US public, distract US political leadership, and distress US personnel on deployment. And both [active duty](#) and [retired](#) military personnel have themselves carried out domestic active shooter attacks, most recently [at an airport](#) in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. During a major international crisis, attacks by veterans could serve to undermine the US population's faith in its military forces. Accordingly, any domestic security problems that might undermine America's capacity to conduct effective diplomatic or operational measures could, by extension, reduce Australia's ability to ensure national and regional security.

DISCUSSION

Australia should lobby the US political system to bring about legislative changes that can impede would-be shooters from gaining access to firearms, and ultimately reduce this form of violence. Any attempts to influence the US policymaking process must be measured and transparent, and conducted in partnership with the appointed representatives of the American people. Australia should communicate that its primary concern is to protect the wellbeing of Australian citizens, and reduce the risk of them being affected by an active shooter event in the United States or at home, while also noting the potential for strategic complications in the event of a major diplomatic crisis.

The Australian Government by itself is unlikely to carry much sway within the legislative and executive branches of the US, because any external intervention in American domestic politics would be met with scepticism, even outright hostility, in many segments of the US population and government. Accordingly, diplomatic overtures should be made in concert with other close US partners, who could also suffer the downstream effects of the US's national security problems. As with Australia, allies like Britain and Germany have suffered mass casualty firearm attacks, and subsequently implemented legislation to reduce the chance that such attacks are repeated. Despite differing social and cultural positions, these countries can provide case studies and empirical data to aid political and public debate, and practical examples on reducing national weapon stocks, such as the [1996 gun buyback](#) in Australia. Rather than giving the appearance of interfering with the affairs of a sovereign state, the intervention should serve as an offer of moral assistance for a close friend in a time of need.