Crippled by paradigm paralysis

The media and governments get the terror threat. Too bad our academics and think tanks don’t.

THE arrest by Indonesian authorities of Jemaah Islamiah terrorists Zarkash and Abu Dujana is of the greatest importance for Australia. It is a stunning achievement by the Indonesian police.

If anyone ever doubted the benefit to us of having a competent, moderate government in Jakarta led by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, they should doubt no longer.

Al-Qa’ida’s surging success in the Middle East but it is suffering real setbacks in Southeast Asia, substantially because of the Indonesian Government, which has arrested 200 terrorists, 60 of whom are in high-profile public trials.

Zarkash was the emir of JI, its overall leader, and in particular its spiritual leader. His formation, formerly headed by Abu Dujana, was the heart of military operations in the Philippines.

These arrests came out of intelligence gleaned in arrests in March, which also yielded a huge cache of explosives. Now Zarkash and Dujana will yield their own intelligence treasure.

Zarkash was still a formidable threat. He has a core membership of 1000, with many more sympathisers. Its mainstream group has reportedly decided to abandon attacks on Westerners for the moment and concentrate on recruitment, indoctrination, exacerbating ethnic and religious conflicts within Indonesia and preparing for future military conflict.

JII, led by Noordin Top, is believed still to support and encourage bombings. No one knows for sure whether Top is but he is believed to be somewhere in Java, while another leading suspect, Dubim, is believed to still be hiding in the southern Philippines. The Indonesian President, his Vice-President, Jusuf Kalla, former President Gus Dur and leaders of mainstream Islamists organisations have made statements welcoming the arrests.

This is central to Indonesia’s success in the war on terror. The civil society is aligned against Islamic extremism and is therefore hard to destroy. The social space it paradoxically nurtured in the failing dictatorships of the Middle East, Indonesia’s success in the war on terror is thus a direct dividend from its democratization nearly a decade ago.

However, these arrests, in one fell swoop, indicate a specific failure by Australia. The Australian media’s response to them was dominated by the three international researchers: Sidney Jukes of the International Crisis Research Group, Rohan Gunaratna, an academic based in Singapore, and US academic Zachary Abaza.

Doesn’t it strike you as bizarre that, in a single week, three academic researchers, gained instant expertise on Southeast Asian terrorism of international repute?

This represents a profoundly important institutional failure by two groups: the first, our universities; the second, our media. How we can be able to deny that the academic community in Indonesia is not capable of producing expertise in this field?

The universities have failed in part because they have been too liberal, too postmodern and left and, paradoxically, the political bias, which says that the West must be the author of all sins, and therefore they don’t study terrorists in their own term. The strategic community in Indonesia has also continued paradigm paralysis, its understanding of the international system’s chronic inability to control terrorism as a serious strategic issue. The plenitude of this outlook is represented by the Australian National University’s Hugh White, who declared in the June 6 issue of The Australian Literary Review that terrorism is not a threat to the international system.

He also declared, mystifyingly, that I am “confident that traditional states will continue to state conflict is a thing of the past.”

As I have never uttered or written anything remotely alleging that and it is certainly not a view I hold, this is a bit strange. I do not think that terrorism can threaten the international system, as states have already come to an agreement to state conflict.

Where old-style strategic analysts such as White are so characteristic is in their failure to see the complexity of the interaction of these two dynamics.

Paul O’Sullivan, the head of ASIO, pointed out in a speech yesterday that Al-Qa’ida does not want to revolutionise the international system. Apart from the question of Al-Qa’ida obtaining weapons of mass destruction, O’Sullivan pointed out:

“The argument that the threat from terrorism is exaggerated also ignores that the dangers of terrorist networks pose a threat to vulnerable states and states that are threatened. In short, it is a very weak argument. It is not a national concern. It is a global concern. It is a threat to the international system.”

Governments in Jakarta and Canberra have to deal with the world as it is, and therefore accord terrorism the attention it deserves.

Universities and think tanks can use their academic professions to grasp the room embrace of dead paradigms. But, in doing so, they offer a suboptimal service to their nation.