How geopolitical threats could impact your people’s travel plans
A more dangerous world?

SURVEY RESULTS - HOW PERCEPTIONS DON’T MATCH REALITY

Potential threats

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One of the most pressing obligations of any company that sends its staff abroad on business is to ensure they stay safe.

The world can undoubtedly be a dangerous place, with political upheaval, outbreaks of disease, wars, crime and terrorist incidents all darkening our TV news screens seemingly on an almost daily basis. But there are occasions when travel to such places is unavoidable.

Therefore, it remains incumbent on companies to ensure that when they plan trips for their staff, they do so in a way that takes all potential threats at that destination into account and ensures that all potential dangers are mitigated to as high a degree as possible.

From building intelligence to having backup accommodation in place, this e-book will give you all the essential advice and tips you need to help ensure your business travellers stay safe while they’re on business in high-risk countries.
A more dangerous world?

It often seems as though the world is becoming a more dangerous place, but is that really the case? Or does the proliferation of 24 hour news, instant headlines and social media simply make it appear so?

It’s ambiguous to say the least. A recent survey asked “All things considered, do you think the world is getting better or worse?” and the results revealed most people think the world is actually getting worse. In Sweden, only 10% thought things are getting better, and in the U.S, it was only 6%.

But while our perceptions may be bleak, the facts don’t bear this out. In a study entitled “The short history of global living conditions and why it matters that we know it” by Max Roser, an economist at the University of Oxford and the founder of Our World in Data in virtually all of the key areas such as poverty, literacy, health, freedom, and education - the world is in a much better place than it was in the past.

That being said, there have been numerous developments over the past two decades - notably 9/11 and the resulting rise in terrorism - that have increased certain aspects of threats faced by travellers, and it’s something travel managers are all too aware of.

A survey by Ipsos MORI of 1,119 people who organise, influence, or are responsible for their organisation’s travel and risk mitigation policies found that almost three quarters (72%) of participants surveyed felt that risks to business travellers have increased, with over half (57%) expecting further increases in risk over the next year. Only 48% say that their organisation’s investment in risk management has increased over the past year, with 47% expecting further increases over the coming year.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of organisations (80%) say their business has modified travel itineraries due to health or travel security concerns over the past year. The most common reasons for modifying travel itineraries were terrorism (51%), country risk ratings (36%), and civil unrest (31%).
Breakdown of Threats

ARMED CONFLICT
Conflict is undoubtedly the most dangerous threat facing any traveller. According to the Council On Foreign Relations’ Global Conflict Tracker, notable areas of concern remain the Middle East, North Africa, the Korean peninsula and Ukraine.

In 2014, flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down while flying over eastern Ukraine, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew on board. Among the passengers were delegates en route to the 20th International AIDS Conference in Melbourne, and company director Nick Norris from Perth, Australia.

POLITICAL CHANGE AND POPULISM
The election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the popularity of populist politicians have created widespread uncertainty across regions of the Western world that had previously been relatively stable. Issues such as trade protectionism, nationalism, and anti-immigrant feeling are a very real potential threat that all travellers heading to other countries should at least have an awareness of.

Last year a teacher from Wales was barred from entering the United States due to Donald Trump’s travel ban. British Muslim Juhel Miah and a group of children and other teachers were about to take off from Iceland on their way to the US when he was removed from the plane at Reykjavik.

CIVIL UNREST
The last few years have seen civil unrest in countries otherwise thought of as reasonably peaceful, from the recent Catalan referendum protests to Greek anti-austerity clashes with the police. Civil strife remains an area of concern that travellers should be wary of, particularly near election times.

Earlier this year, even the idyllic island nation The Maldives was highlighted as a possibly dangerous destination by the UK, Canada,
France and China after the Maldives government declared a 15-day state of emergency amid political uncertainty and violent protests in Malé, the capital of the Maldives.

**TERRORISM**

Terrorism continues to be a cause of global concern with a range of threats presenting themselves from islamic extremism to far right violence. Continued instability in the Middle East means this is likely to remain one of the biggest issues for travellers in the coming years. Recent terror attacks in cities previously considered safe, including Paris, Manchester and London, means some degree of alert when travelling on business is now always advisable.

Last year a terrorist killed five people in the Swedish capital Stockholm after driving a truck into a crowd of people, illustrating that terrorism can strike anywhere - at any time.

**KIDNAPPING**

Continues to be a very real threat especially in Latin America, North Africa and parts of Africa and Southeast Asia. A business traveller will often be considered a valuable prize due to the belief their company and/or government will negotiate financially for their return. This is such a huge field that many insurance companies offer kidnap and ransom insurance, and there are also training camps available to business travellers in how to survive a kidnapping.

In January this year, two American and two Canadian citizens kidnapped in Nigeria were released following a gun battle between the kidnappers and a joint force of local police and military personnel. During the rescue operation, two of their police escorts were killed during an exchange of fire with the abductors.

**LEGAL DANGERS**

Not all dangers are illegal ones and every year many travellers find themselves falling foul of the local laws.

In Dubai last year for example, a Scottish man found himself locked up for public indecently after allegedly accidentally brushing his hand against another man’s hip in a bar. Other behaviour deemed illegal in Dubai includes having sex outside marriage and being gay. Travellers should therefore be made aware of any laws that could prove problematic.
Building Intelligence

Knowledge of where your staff are heading is the absolute cornerstone of keeping them safe, so the first port of call should always be gathering as much information as possible.

There are a number of ways to access the most up-to-date travel threat information. The US State Department has a threat level for every county in the world, ranging from ‘Do Not Travel’ to ‘Exercise Normal Precautions’.

You are also able to access specific information on a country by simply clicking on it. The State Department’s description of the security situation in Russia, for example, is: “In the last decade, Moscow and St. Petersburg have been the targets of terrorist attacks. Bombings have occurred at Russian government buildings, airports, hotels, tourist sites, markets, entertainment venues, schools, residential complexes, and on public transportation (subways, buses, trains, and scheduled commercial flights).”

The site also offers advice on particular criminal activities an area can be noted for. Its description of Mexico, for example, includes: “Crime in Mexico occurs at a high rate and can be violent. Street crime, ranging from pickpocketing to armed robbery, carjackings, kidnapping, and extortion are serious problems in most major cities. Resort areas and tourist destinations in Mexico generally do not see high levels of violence and crime, though there are exceptions.”

As well as official state advice from the likes of the US and British Home Office, there are also a plethora of private security consultants that offer access to threat analysis such as Control Risks. It has accessible ‘threat maps’ including maps for likelihood of kidnappings and security risks, it also has specific maps broken down by continent.

By compiling information from a number of trustworthy sources, the company can compile a holistic picture of the destination in questions.
Developing a Formal Travel Security Policy

Regardless of their size, most companies will have some type of policy written down that lays down the ins and outs of their travel policy covering things such as cost and employee obligations, but it’s also highly advisable to have a separate, distinct policy that covers corporate travel security policy.

There is no one-size-fits all security plan document, but according to security expert and author of the Travel Security Handbook Sven Leidel, they should at least include the following:

Risk assessment: A robust plan will have a procedure in place to review the overall threat to workers traveling, even to relatively safe destinations.

Training: Staff should be given formal briefings on how to respond if they are under threat while on business travel. The training should be given to every member of staff - regardless of whether they are regular travellers or not. It should include the basics of staying safe - for example - not hiring unofficial and unregistered taxi companies and not divulging too much information about why they are there or where they are staying to strangers.

Communications: Clear communications channels should be established for when things go wrong. This could include a hotline number monitored by on-call staff at the company.

Safety and security protocols: Established ways of behaving while abroad should be written into the policy. This could include a responsibility to wear appropriate clothing and stay in areas of the destination deemed necessary for the completion of their business-related duties.

Hotel selection: There should be minimum standards that deem whether a hotel in a potentially dangerous city should be selected. For example, are they part of a respected chain, have there been incidents there in the past?
Emergency notification procedures: Staff should all be aware of the procedure to follow if they fall into trouble abroad. This should include a list of key contacts at the company.

It should set out as a matter of record the responsibilities not only of the company to its travelling staff, but also of the staff themselves to follow the guidance laid down.

But according to Sven, the most important aspect is the risk assessment as each one will be different. The security needs of a trip to Bogota for example, will be wholly different to those to Berlin.

While a plan for the latter may not include the bells and whistles of a plan for heading to Colombia, a good safety plan will still have a procedure in place to review the threats posed in relatively safe cities, especially given the evolving threat of multinational terrorism which no longer respects borders.

Focussing on Your Traveller

When trying to mitigate threats, it’s advisable to perform a set of tasks with your traveller before, during, and after the trip in question.

BEFORE THE TRIP:

Ensure your traveller knows who their first point of contact is if something goes wrong. In necessary, more than one person should be ‘on call’ at your company so that they can take shifts, ensuring there is always someone the traveller can get through to if they have to, no matter what time of day or night.

Have a priority notification list. When the call comes in that something has happened, the person taking the call should know exactly who at the company needs to be informed. This could include the travel manager, or for example, head of company security and the CEO.

Ensure they carry back-up photocopies and electronic copies/scans of important documents. The company should also keep copies.
Retain several copies of the traveler’s itinerary and provide one to the travel manager and/or head of company security. It should include travel dates, flight numbers, arrangements for ground transportation, and local points of contact.

Vet hotels and transport companies before your traveller arrives. Ensure your member of staff is booked in with trustworthy transport and a hotel with a good reputation.

Also consider having a list of ‘safe havens’ they can use, such as other reputable hotels or government buildings where they can take refuge or ask for assistance.

Obtain regularly updated airline safety to ensure the flight companies you’re using have thoroughly updated safety procedures in place for flying in and out of high-risk countries. Airports can be especially problematic in countries where tensions are high, with spotters and other dubious characters often employed to locate and identify business travellers. Your traveller therefore should spend as little time as possible loitering at airports.

Give your traveller a full briefing. It is essential that you ensure they are aware of the situation on the ground and who they need to contact if things go wrong. This should also include advice on cultural sensitivities and basic advice such as not engaging in discussions with strangers about issues such as politics and religion, as well as practical information about not divulging too much information about their movements to strangers - including hotel staff and taxi drivers. They should also be given a list of numbers to call, not only at your company but the local embassy where they’re staying, and the local authorities (if they have been deemed trustworthy during your information gathering phase).

Make sure you have government and embassy contact details and ensure your traveller does too.

Ensure your traveler has been advised on minimising the risk presented by their appearance and the goods they’re travelling with. Standing out too much can make them a target for unwanted attention. To this end, they should consider trying to blend in as much as possible - this
should include observing religious and cultural dress sensitivities. They should also avoid flaunting wealth such as expensive clothes and jewellery, or logos that identify their nationality.

Make sure they don’t go off the beaten track. This includes tourist trips or being invited on excursions by tour guides. Unless they absolutely have to leave, their stay at a risky destination should be limited to their hotel and any destination that necessitates the completion of company business.

Have alternative travel and hotel plans in place in case they need to be relocated or brought home at short notice. Having a backup hotel they can check in to that is at least some distance away from the area of the city/town they were originally staying in is advisable. Also, consider how they will get home if they can’t access their original travel plan. Are there other modes of transport? Could they get to a different airport if the one they were going to leave from becomes inaccessible? Are there any other flights available out of that airport - even if not direct, could it get them to a safe country? It is advisable to have alternative travel provisions planned just in case.

Consider using a reputable private security firm. It could also be worth compiling a list of such firms based in that country who could assist during a crisis.
**DURING THE TRIP:**

Monitor their flight and ensure it has arrived safe, this is quick and simple to do using most airlines’ own website and/or accompanying app.

Ensure your traveller contacts you on the ground to ensure (a) they have arrived safe and (b) they’re aware of what they need to do next in terms of travel and accommodation.

Ensure regular check ins. If the destination is particularly high risk. Travelling staff should check in with their designated contact at your company HQ on a regular basis to say they are okay. This need not be by telephone but could be via a company Facebook page or a Google doc on a shared account or a WhatsApp group for example.

Traveller tracking. Some apps such as Vismo allow you to track your traveller no matter where they are. This must be done with the consent of the traveller if you’re based in an EU country in order to comply with General Data Protection Regulation.

**AFTER THE TRIP.**

You should ensure you debrief your traveller when they get back for a first hand account of what things are like on the ground, as well as what worked in terms of the travel plan and what didn’t. This will provide an invaluable learning experience for the company and ensure that any future trips can go even smoother. The process doesn’t need to be formal, and can includes things such as surveys or a face-to-face interview.

Investigation. Hopefully this may not be necessary, but if things went wrong a thorough investigation involving all company stakeholders needs to take place. What failed? Was it avoidable? What changes need to be made to your policies and procedures? As a company you have a duty to keep you travellers stay safe, if something goes awry, you also have a duty to find out what went wrong.
Conclusion.

With the ever-changing world there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to ensuring the safety and security of your staff when they travel abroad. Every country is different, and every situation is constantly evolving. However, by following the procedures laid out in this e-book it will ensure you have the basics in place to help your travellers as they traverse even the most risky of locations.
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