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### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### EMERGING CHALLENGES

##### **Bangkok bombing: a new threat for Thailand?**

The huge bomb explosion that targeted a popular Hindu shrine in central Bangkok on 17th August killed 20 people and wounded about 125. Earlier on Tuesday afternoon, a pipe bomb was thrown from Sathorn Bridge in Bangkok, but it hit a pillar and bounced into a canal, where it detonated harmlessly, sending up a large plume of water. So far, no group has taken responsibility for the bombing. Thai Authorities said they were looking for multiple suspects, starting from a young man in a yellow T-shirt who was captured on a closed-circuit television dumping a rucksack at the shrine shortly before the explosion.

The Thai army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha's and other officials have described it as an attempt to sabotage Thailand's tourism industry. The timing of the blast at the beginning of the high tourism season means it could be particularly damaging to this sector, which accounts for 8,5% of Thailand's GDP.

It seems that basically, the attack has no direct influence on group travellers, but industry insiders all agreed that the attacks would influence individual travellers' plans.

Anyway on the 29th of August, Police in Bangkok arrested Adem Karadag as a suspect connected to the blast on August 17. The 28 year old man was in possession of a Turkish passport, but probably the passport is a fake. On 1st September, Thailand's prime minister said that a second foreign suspect had been arrested at a border checkpoint with Cambodia. Security analysts have speculated that China's ethnic

Uighur minority — or their co-religious sympathizers — may have been behind the attack, motivated by Thailand's forced repatriation of 109 Uighur refugees last month to await an uncertain fate in China. Scores of suspected Uighurs — a Turkic-speaking minority in China's northwestern Xinjiang region who have long chafed under Chinese control — were sentenced for illegal entry into Thailand in March 2014.

Many were found to have entered the kingdom along its eastern border with Cambodia, with the biggest check point in Sa Kaeo province, as others were discovered during a raid on a suspected people-smuggling camp in the kingdom's deep south. A Thai police spokesman refused to "exclude any possibility" when asked whether Turkish nationals in the country had been questioned over the Bangkok shrine bomb. Some Uighurs have stepped up a domestic campaign of violence — usually with knife assaults — but are not known to have ever carried out an attack outside China, or anything as sophisticated as the Erawan blast.

There is also a separatist conflict in Thailand's south. Some separatist organizations are active there since many years; they are led by ethnic Malays who are predominantly Muslim. We should be sceptical about seeing the separatists as perpetrators of extremist religious violence, though. Despite fears about the "Islamization" of the war, so far the insurgency has not appeared motivated by religion. Moreover, the insurgents tend to operate in southern Thailand — attacks in places like Bangkok are pretty rare. However, there are some concerns that younger insurgents could be attracted by ISIS propaganda, and that some commanders might want to escalate attacks against civilians.

A more recent approach seems to suggest that the attack has been executed by a criminal network active in human organ trafficking: this network seems to be composed by some Uighurs active in Thailand. Despite more than one month has been passed, the context and the details of this terrorist attack seem to be quite hazy. Too many different hypotheses and rumours surround this case while the police is still looking for some of the perpetrators of the attack: there are still so many open questions that it is not easy to find a clear answer, nor at the national or international level, despite the collaboration between China, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand.