



# UNISCI Discussion Papers

## THE ASEAN RESPONSE TO TERRORISM\*

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### 1. Introduction

The ASEAN response to the threat of terrorism will to a certain extent mirror the comprehensive security approach adopted in the 1960s and 1970s to deal with the peril of communism. Explicitly, an understanding that collective ASEAN will is necessary to deal with terrorism is evident in the plethora of statements issued at various ASEAN ministerial meetings about the terrorist threat and the need to combat it. Yet, implicitly, due to differences in threat perceptions, the varied domestic contexts, and the strength of national will to resolve the problem, the capacities of the various countries to deal with terrorism will vary considerably.

This paper analyses how the issue of terrorism has been addressed within Southeast Asia by assessing the responses of individual countries as well as cooperation at the ASEAN and ARF levels. My argument is that in this initial stage in the war against terror, states in the region must concentrate on three issues. First, to fine tune multilateral and bilateral responses to terrorism. Second, to look beyond the war on terrorism, by dealing once and for all with the inequities within their countries spurring it. Third<sup>2</sup>, to move from reactive to proactive approaches to dealing with terrorism by stressing the importance of practical measures like the creation of a Common Threat Assessment Centre that would not be inhibited by inter-state political conditions thereby allowing for better coordination and implementation of anti-terrorist strategies.

### 2. Domestic front

Domestic efforts are significantly the most important because in the end it is the capabilities and will of individual countries to act against terrorists within their own borders that matters most.

Until the Bali bombing of 12 October 2002, Indonesia was in denial mode over the presence of a terrorist network within its borders. For most Indonesians, September 11 was

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<sup>1</sup> Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI

<sup>2</sup> I would like to record my thanks to my colleagues Rohan Gunaratna and Elena Pavlova for stressing to me the need for the creation of a Common Threat Assessment Centre in the region.



largely an American issue. The Indonesian media generally reinforced this stance of denial. (Even a few weeks after the Bali bombing, the media was rife with stories that the CIA was responsible for the bombing). Furthermore, Islamic revivalism and the critical importance of Muslim voters in elections due in 2004 made it difficult for President Megawati Sukarnoputri to take firm action, though a few key foreign terrorist operatives were quietly despatched to the Americans.<sup>3</sup>

The terrorist outrage in Bali coupled with well publicised investigations by the Indonesian police have altered the country's perception of the terrorist threat. Aided by foreign forensic expertise, the Indonesian police made a number of significant arrests particularly Muchlas, also known as Ali Ghuffon, a key operational leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network.

Within the context of a comprehensive strategy to deal with terrorism, the government has done well to resolve longstanding local conflicts in Maluku and Sulawesi. The Malino peace agreement apart from improving the prospects of peace and stability within Indonesia also contribute to the fight against terrorism because local conflict, if allowed to fester can easily be exploited by radical groups wishing to pursue their own agenda. While Indonesia should be lauded for such positive developments, it is an understatement to say that more needs to be done. It is likely that the JI network maybe quite extensive. Over the past five years, while the security agencies have been riven by inter-service rivalries due to Indonesia's complex political transition, JI has been allowed to develop unhindered within the country and for much longer period among radical Muslim exiles from the Suharto regime. The current spate of arrests may be only scratching the surface.

Islam being an important force in Indonesian politics could be an inhibiting factor in Indonesia's anti-terrorist struggle. In this regard, political factors may hinder sustained efforts at combating terrorism particularly if terrorists decide to lie low and not mount more attacks so as to risk further disruption of their infrastructure and alienating the population to their cause. With, parliamentary and presidential elections due in 2004, it is likely that the major political contenders may not want to be seen as being tough on radical groups in order not to alienate conservative Muslims.

Radicals are trying to increase their political space. No moderate political party or socio-political grouping will be immune to infiltration as radicals aim to influence the agenda of such organizations. The disbanding of militias by radical groups like the Lasykar Jihad and the Front Pembela Islam should be viewed as a public relations exercise until proven otherwise. The presence of large numbers of battle-hardened mujahidin troops remains a source of concern. Indonesia's fundamental problems cannot be resolved quickly. The economic distress brought about by the economic crisis since 1997 and the presence of rampant corruption provide the ideal conditions for exploitation for radicals to advance their cause. Indonesia's institutions of government and governance, and more specifically, its legal

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<sup>3</sup> On 5 June 2002, Omar al-Farouq, the alleged leading Al Qaeda operative in Southeast Asia was arrested in the west Java city of Bogor and promptly dispatched to Afghanistan under American custody. Likewise, on 16 September 2002 a German citizen of Arab descent, Seyam Reda was apprehended by the Police and charged with visa violations and subsequently handed over to the Americans. Through covert means, a further six foreign nationals were nabbed by Indonesian intelligence as Al Qaeda suspects and handed and placed under American safekeeping. See Tatik S. Hafitz, [The War on Terror and the Future of Indonesian Democracy](#) IDSS Working Paper No. 46, March 2003, pp. 13.



and judicial systems remain weak. Such flaws coupled with the country's geography – a vast archipelago whose borders are difficult to police even in the best of circumstances – make it a potential haven for JI and JI-linked groups.

With an on-going Muslim separatist struggle in the South against perceived Christian domination, the Philippines was the first country in Southeast Asia targeted by Al Qaeda as a base for terrorist operations. The Al Qaeda's early links with the Abu Sayaf leaders coupled with the poor law and order and governance situation in the South made the region an ideal location for terrorist training camps. A large number of terrorists and radicals have been trained in camps usually under the control of the MNLF. In this regard, effective counter-terrorist operations in the Philippines have a bearing on the overall counter-terrorism effort in the region.

Given the evidence over the years of Al Qaeda infiltration, including cases involving Ramzi Yousof and Operation Bojinka in 1994-95 and the bombings in Manila, Philippine authorities are convinced that there is a nexus between international terrorism and the Muslim separatist struggles in the south. To their credit, the Philippines moved aggressively to deal with the ASG and did not hesitate to seek external assistance for this purpose. U.S. assistance has been sought to upgrade the skills of the Philippine armed forces and equip them with better military equipment. On-going programmes include the attachment of US military advisors to Philippine units, including during operations, and the provision of tactical intelligence and even air support. These efforts are reported to have significantly weakened the ASG on Basilan Islands, one of its strongholds.

Unfortunately, security operations against the ASG have revealed major shortcomings in the security services. The military remains poorly equipped. It is handicapped by corruption in the police and military forces with reports of collusion between the ASG and the security forces at the local level. To compound matters, the security agencies face a multitude of problems in the south. While aggressive action has been taken against the ASG, the MILF with its various factions remains a formidable guerrilla force of 10,000 to 15,000 fighters that the AFP has never been able to defeat decisively. Under the Arroyo Administration, the authorities have sought a negotiated political settlement with the MILF and a ceasefire is in place. However, there are indications that the MILF's linkages with JI and Al Qaeda have continued and some training of Southeast Asian militants still continues under MILF auspices.

Southern Philippines also has porous maritime borders with East Malaysia and with Indonesia and there have been known movements of terrorist elements between these three countries across this border. Attempts to control transnational crime, including terrorism, in this area through a trilateral Philippines-Malaysia-Indonesia agreement have reportedly met with little demonstrable success so far.

The Philippine counter-terrorism effort remains hampered due to inadequate training and equipment of security forces and above all by the complexity of the situation in the south where Manila is attempting to nullify the ASG threat militarily (with partial success) while seeking a political solution to a bigger problem related to the MILF. Though the Philippines' inability to deal with the MILF remains a source of considerable concern, it is encouraging to note that strides have been made in dealing with local grievances in Mindanao by treating the MNLF as a rational adversary with practical demands. This is a wise course of action. Unlike



Bin Laden's apocalyptic goals, such local grievances are indeed amenable to negotiations and political solutions.

Thailand is still in denial mode as to whether it has a terrorist problem. At best, it has acknowledged that JI and other terrorists could be using Thailand for transit to other locations, but not as a base. However, evidence abounds that South Thailand has been used as sanctuary by terrorists due to the presence of a large Muslim population, Muslim separatist groups, and the weak law and order situation there.

According to the Singapore government, JI elements that had escaped the first wave of arrests in December 2001 were thought to have fled to South Thailand. The White Paper published by the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs in January 2003 made mention of an unnamed jihad group based in south Thailand which was a member of the regional alliance formed by the JI in 1999 called the Rabitatul Mujahidin. According to various reports, Bangkok has been a haven for money-laundering and document forgery, with a significant Middle Eastern and African Muslim community. Last year, with the help of the FBI, one fake travel document ring in the Bangkok area serving the Al Qaeda was broken up by Thai authorities and suspected terrorists have been known to stay in Bangkok's Middle Eastern district.

Though Thailand has stepped up security to ensure that its holiday attractions are better protected from terrorist attack, it does not seem to have taken significant disruptive action against the terrorist network operating within its borders. All this combined with its porous borders and liberal immigration rules, makes Thailand a weak link in the region's anti-terrorism drive. The arrest of two Thai Muslims on 10 June 2003 who confessed to planning bomb attacks at embassies and tourist spots in Thailand and admitted belonging to JI was a huge wake-up call to the Thai government. These revelations come in the wake of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's admission a month earlier that JI members were present in the kingdom, but insisted they were not active. His admission came after Cambodian authorities smashed a radical Islamic network and charged three men with JI membership, including two Thais and an Egyptian.

The record is better with Malaysia and Singapore. Both countries have efficient and professional security services and the political will to deal firmly with the terrorist threat. Since December 2001, Singapore has detained over 30 terrorist suspects under the Internal Security Act, while Malaysia has detained approximately 70 people. Both countries have benefited from good intelligence cooperation with each other on the terrorist threat, with other ASEAN countries and with friendly powers like the U.S. and Australia.

Both countries can adopt comprehensive strategies better owing to healthier economic conditions and relatively sound institutions of state and governance. Malaysia arguably faces a greater range of challenges in nullifying its terrorist threat as opposed to Singapore. Malaysia is a Muslim majority country and since 1998 has seen an upsurge in support for the opposition Islamic party PAS. To curtail the influence of PAS and make the country more economically competitive, the government wants to revamp its education system by placing more emphasis on English. Significant is its aim to reform the Islamic education curriculum as well as placing greater restrictions on the Islamic party. These are major challenges that are bound to elicit opposition in one form or another. Whether they can be carried out with the necessary



sophistication to minimize adverse repercussions will be a major test for Mahathir government coming at a time where economic conditions are not so favourable.

### **3. Multilateral frameworks**

The exchange of information between countries is critically important because terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and JI operate and cooperate across state borders. Cooperation within ASEAN has two aspects to it. One is political and this is expressed through various ASEAN declarations on terrorism. Two, the declarations are important in reinforcing the political will of countries to keep up the fight against terrorism.

The declarations have included the Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism issued in November 2001 which stressed the need to strengthen cooperation at all levels – bilateral, regional and international to combat terrorism in a “comprehensive manner”. This ASEAN position was reiterated at the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) meeting in Brunei in July 2002 and at the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in November 2002 after the Bali bombing. Similarly, the Philippines initiated an anti-terrorist pact with Indonesia and Malaysia as soon as the United States began organising its global anti-terrorist coalition. A three-power agreement, signed on 7 May 2002 in Kuala Lumpur, binds the three states to carrying out joint exercises to fight terrorism and other crimes; sharing airline passenger lists; setting up telephone hotlines; and tightening control of their borders. The above measures could be interpreted as state-level responses to threats of a transnational character linked to militants wanting to set up a single Islamic state comprising these three nations. Cambodia and Thailand have since acceded to the agreement. The partners cooperate informally with Singapore and the United States.

At the multilateral level, the most significant mechanism is the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC). AMMTC is headed by the ministers of Home Affairs and forms the core of ASEAN counter-terrorism cooperation. Terrorism has been on its agenda long before the September 11 attacks. Since that event, the AMMTC decided to hold a Special Meeting on Terrorism in May 2002 where it updated its terrorist work plan, emphasizing capacity building. Malaysia has offered training on intelligence procurement in relation to terrorism and a workshop on psychological operations and psychological warfare in relation to terrorism. Singapore has offered logistical support for training on bomb/explosives detection, post-blast investigation, airport security and passport/document security and inspection in relation to terrorism.

There are also ASEAN agreements with dialogue partners. An ASEAN-U.S. Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism was signed in July 2002. In this regard, ASEAN’s joint declaration with China on non-traditional security goes beyond terrorism and remains largely symbolic, more a quid pro quo that China wanted after ASEAN signed the agreement with the U.S.

A lot of activity has taken place under the auspices of the ARF. Enjoying a new lease of life, a lot of good work is being accomplished in the Inter-Sessional Group on Confidence Building Measures. After the September 11 attacks, two ISG meetings were scheduled, one in New Delhi, 19-21 December 2001, and another in Hanoi from 22-24 April 2002. Two workshops were held under the framework of ISGs – a Malaysia-U.S. Workshop on Financial Measures against Terrorism in Honolulu (24-26 March 2002) whose Statement was adopted



by the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF meeting in July 2002; and a Thailand-Australia Workshop on Prevention of Terrorism held in Bangkok 17-19 April 2002 whose recommendations were also adopted by the 9<sup>th</sup> ARF Meeting. Such meetings allow the best practices in the area to be showcased and expertise tapped as well as providing a useful platform for valuable networking.

In Brunei last August, the ARF agreed to freeze the financial assets of terrorist groups. At the ARF meetings, the 10 ASEAN states and the United States also agreed to share information on terrorist activities, develop together more effective counter-terrorism policies, and enhance liaison among their law enforcement agencies. For Washington, an early dividend from its informal cooperation came in the form of Kuwaiti Al Qaeda operative Omar al-Faruq, whom the Indonesians turned over to the CIA.

Other initiatives exist outside the ARF and ASEAN frameworks. For instance, there is a proposal to set up a regional counter-terrorism centre in Malaysia on which the U.S. and Malaysia have been in liaison. On a practical level, Malaysia is able to engage in intelligence cooperation with the U.S. through a bilateral U.S.-Malaysia Anti-Terrorism Pact signed in May 2002.

#### **4. Regional responses to terrorism: Concluding observations**

Southeast Asian governments continue to treat homegrown Islamists cautiously – being concerned primarily with the threat of separatism, political instability and social upheaval, as well as their own political fortunes. The common fear is that too-aggressive prosecution of the anti-terrorist campaign would progressively radicalise more and more of the disparate groupings that make up Southeast Asian Islam.

Yet, historical experience suggests that religious violence is best suppressed quickly and justly. Any lack of official resolve at the outset is liable to worsen the situation. For government's failure to damp down religious violence before it spreads too widely could encourage agitators and terrorists to even greater effort and could lead a country down the slippery slope of communal violence. Ultimately there has to be recognition that an ideology or an idea cannot be destroyed by military, intelligence or police action. It has to be politically contested and defeated. Hence, the importance of effective political action has to be reiterated. In the case of the terrorist threat, this has to be done primarily within the Muslim communities and by Muslims themselves. While governments, can facilitate the process, they must be careful not to unwittingly undercut or marginalise moderate elements within the Islamic polity. A useful example of this can be seen manner in which the leaders of Indonesia's mainstream Islamic organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah consistently issued statements clarifying that the war in Iraq was not a conflict between Islam and the West. Such statements greatly undercut radical Islamists interpretations of the conflict in Iraq thereby minimising the influence of such perspectives in shaping Indonesian mainstream Muslim perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

This early, the anti-terrorist campaign is sharpening the contrast between the strong states of Singapore and Malaysia and their relatively weaker counterparts in Indonesia and the Philippines. Singapore and Malaysia have come down hard on the networks in their territories.

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<sup>4</sup> See, Leonard C. Sebastian, "Indonesian State Responses to September 11, the Bali bombings and the War in Iraq: Sowing the seeds for an Accommodationist Islamic Framework?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* Vol. 16, no. 3 (October 2003), forthcoming.



Tough Internal Security Acts held over from the colonial era have allowed them to round up close to a hundred terrorist suspects. Singapore has also foiled plots to bomb western embassies and to attack American warships in the Malacca Straits.

Both Indonesia and the Philippines, with its long and porous coastline; its weak government and law-enforcement agencies; its economic distress; poor law enforcement record; its communal strife; and a political climate that inhibits the repression of extremists make it a good locality for terrorists to burrow in. In these two countries, it will take time to fine tune anti-terrorism strategies. Like the Philippines, one area that Indonesia can benefit is for more consideration to be given to improving the capacity of the security agencies to play a coherent role in the struggle against terrorism, specifically, the national police forces and intelligence agencies. In this regard, the onus may be on Developed countries to provide short-term assistance in the form of equipment and training for security protection systems in order to “harden” potential targets. Efforts also need to be made to reinforce expertise in forensics, investigation, post-disaster management, community relations and anti-money laundering techniques. Over the longer term, development programmes should be crafted to promote good governance with an emphasis placed judicial reform and community policing. Another area of critical concern is the need to enhance “human security” specifically assistance through basic human needs projects that would be directed at areas, which have produced the most radical groups.

At the multilateral level, ASEAN was rhetorically engaged and has produced frameworks of action promising cooperation in intelligence sharing and joint action. While the habits of consultation among regional police forces and intelligence agencies have existed at an informal level for a long period of time, it remains unclear exactly how much information is actually shared.

In conclusion, at least four factors that characterise Southeast Asia’s regional security environment will act as a major constraint on states capability to respond swiftly to acts of terrorism. (1) Porous borders and generally weak immigration controls, with administrative requirements being surmounted through corruption; (2) long-standing economic and trade links between Southeast Asia and Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, many of which operate outside normal financial channels not readily monitored by governments, and which in turn have facilitated funds transfers from the Middle east and South Asia to radical groups in the region; (3) widespread criminal activity including drug trafficking in the region which in turn can facilitate the movement of resources by terrorists; and (4) the availability of large supplies of indigenously produced and imported weapons in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Such conditions will dilute the effectiveness of multilateral security cooperation against terror so that regional security institutions such as the ARF would function only at a moderate level, namely, characterised by security dialogues and discussions that remain purely at the first stage: confidence building. Indeed the strong assertion of the principle of non-interference in each other’s internal affairs in a transformed era could well be the stumbling block for effective anti-terror cooperation. To be effectively addressed, the agenda of

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<sup>5</sup> See “Terrorism in Southeast Asia”, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia. Available online at <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/FAD/sea.htm>



problems may require ASEAN to adopt a more pro-active role – a role quite different from the basis upon which the regional grouping has proceeded using the “ASEAN Way”.

In an attempt to embark on new security cooperation strategies to deal with non-traditional threats to regional security, more mechanisms for collaboration and coordination have to be established – strategies that can work immediately - before the JI is able to mount new operations. Of import is the need for (1) the facilitation of more exchanges - person to person/agency to agency; (2) the establishment of common databases; and (3) the need to develop a multinational taskforce. These activities should be coordinated under the auspices of a Common Threat Assessment Centre that could serve as the nucleus for fostering closer regional cooperation in areas such intelligence, extradition, law enforcement, airport security, bomb detection, formation of national anti-terrorism units, and curbing arms smuggling and drug cartels. These were significant areas of concern identified by the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism held in Kuala Lumpur on 20-21 May 2002.