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The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia

A Net Assessment

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Summary

The Current Terrorist Threat

Overall, the terrorist threat to the countries covered in this monograph remains a serious but largely manageable security problem. In Thailand, while the scale and scope of Islamist-inspired violence in the three southern Malay provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat have become more acute since 2004, the conflict has (thus far) not spread to the country's majority non-Muslim population nor has it taken on an anti-Western dimension.[1] Indeed, at the time of this writing, outside demagogues and radicals had singularly failed to gain any concerted logistical or ideological foothold in the region, which suggests that Thailand's so-called "deep south" is unlikely to become a new hub for furthering the transregional designs of fundamentalist jihadi elements.

In the Philippines, Moro Muslim extremism has declined markedly since its high point in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG) both remain factionalized with the bulk of their existing cadres mostly confined to isolated pockets across the Sulu archipelago. The leadership and

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[1]   In this monograph, *Islamist* is used when describing Islam as a religiopolitical phenomenon. The term is an immediate derivation of *Islamism*, which has its moorings in significant events of the 20th century, such as the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation. It is distinguished from *Islamic*, which is more correctly understood as signifying religion and culture as it has developed over the past millennium of Islam's history. For more on these terminological nuances, see Denoeux, 2002; Roy, 1994; and 9/11 Commission Report, 2004, p. 562, fn. 3.

mainstream membership of the largest and best-equipped Moro rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), appears sincere in its stated desire to reach a comprehensive peace settlement, despite the breakdown of a cease-fire reached in July 2003. Although a perceptible communist threat continues to exist, the New People's Army (NPA) has witnessed a steady decline in numbers and weapons. Moreover, the NPA's ability to fully control those areas that it has infiltrated, which presently amount to only 5 percent of the country's total, is declining.

The situation in Indonesia is somewhat more fluid. On the one hand, the latent threat posed by Islamist radicalism has patently declined since 2000, reflecting both more effective CT actions on the part of the police and widespread popular opposition to militant groups whose attacks have disproportionately affected Muslim interests. On the other hand, a significant minority of the Indonesian population harbors a desire for some form of fundamentalist Islamic political order, which under certain circumstances could spark a resurgence of support for extremist jihadism if not carefully managed and countered.

The threat environment in Indonesia also has direct relevance for transnational terrorism in Southeast Asia, not least because the country plays host to JI. Although the network has been substantially weakened by the arrests of several leading midlevel commanders, as well as internal disputes over the utility of large-scale, indiscriminate bombings, it has demonstrated a proven capacity to adapt and will probably never be fully expunged as a movement of radical ideas.

Counterterrorism Responses

A true assessment of the current terrorist environment in Southeast Asia must take into account the nature and appropriateness of state responses. Again, there is reason for guarded optimism here. In Thailand, the government has gradually come to appreciate the virtues of more nuanced, dialogue-based approaches to conflict mitigation in the southern border provinces. The new emphasis on development and "soft" hearts-and-minds initiatives is likely to continue regardless of the political complexion of future Thai governments.

In the Philippines, the armed forces have made significant progress in defense reform and civil-military relations and are now reaping significant rewards in the ongoing battle against Islamist and Moro extremists in Mindanao. The admittedly halting negotiations with MILF have made progress, and, with the notable exception of ancestral domain, most outstanding issues have now been settled. Manila has also made headway against the NPA insurgency through a combination of "hard" and "soft" security policies aimed at normalizing (former) hostile communist areas.

Finally, in Indonesia, the central government has fully committed to professionalizing the police force and ensuring that it is internationally recognized as adept and accountable. In addition, Jakarta is slowly augmenting what hitherto have been very weak coastal surveillance capabilities, and it now recognizes the need for a concerted deradicalization program. Most significantly, the government has established a credible and effective CT unit—Special Detachment [Detasmen Khusus] 88—which reports directly to the military and has been credited with the neutralization of at least 450 militants since 2005.

Policy Recommendations

While U.S. security assistance to Southeast Asia has been important to the development of a more efficacious regional CT strategy and structure, much more could be done to inoculate this part of the world against the possibility of a renewed terrorist threat, from either domestic extremists or an emboldened transborder jihadist network. Accordingly, this monograph offers the following recommendations.

Better integrate CT, law and order, and development policies to address the issue of corruption in the region. This enduring and pervasive problem not only fuels resentment against incumbent governments, it also sustains popular support for extremist groups. It is crucially important that elected officials, bureaucrats, and other representatives of the state are able to win the trust and confidence of their own communities and thereby deny terrorists the political influence they need to grow their support and mount effective operations.

Promote further police reform in the Philippines and Thailand. This could certainly be done through the current bilateral suite of assistance that is provided through the U.S. Department of State (DoS) Anti-terrorism Assistance (ATA) program, International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) program, and International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). However, the United States should additionally consider sponsoring a much broader program of professional training through nascent but proven multilateral arrangements. Entities such as the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), and the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok all offer the major advantage of bringing practitioners together in a single organizational setting where professional networks can be built and ideas and perspectives on terrorism and CT can be exchanged and debated.

Foster a less benign environment for terrorism in Southeast Asia by increasing support for regional institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the East Asia Summit. Channeling security and CT assistance through these collaborative frameworks will help reduce the perception that terrorism is an exclusively American problem. It will also provide an opportunity to buttress indigenous capabilities in areas where Washington is unable to operate bilaterally for political or logistical reasons.

Press all 10 ASEAN countries to sign and ratify each of the 16 United Nations (UN) conventions dealing with CT. Although political agreement was reached at the Jakarta Sub-Regional Ministerial Meeting in March 2007 on the need to strengthen legal CT tools, the fact remains that many Southeast Asian countries have yet to enact a broad range of conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.

Emphasize the use of soft power to enhance local governance in regions susceptible to fundamentalist propaganda (through INCLE); foster greater military and police awareness of human rights and appropriate rules of engagement (through U.S. Department of Defense–sponsored International Military Education Training program, or IMET, courses); *and promote general socioeconomic development* (through the U.S. Agency

for International Development [USAID] and DoS Economic Support Fund, or ESF). To ensure that these types of endeavors have a long-term, sustainable impact, it is critical that they be carried out in close cooperation with national and local authorities and are executed with due regard for community consultation in civic action planning.

Supplement the use of soft power with "smart" power. This can be achieved by (1) spearheading public diplomacy, exchange, and educational efforts to discredit perverted interpretations of Islam; (2) empowering moderate Muslim leaders as voices for greater religious negotiation; (3) investigating possible alternatives for reducing the pull of pan-regional sentiment from the inside out, by ascertaining the extent to which emergent fissures between JI's mainstream and the pro-bombing faction can be exploited; and (4) promoting prison reform to reduce the potential for jails to be exploited as recruiting or radicalization hubs. These dialogue and communication initiatives should focus not only on Southeast Asian states with established militant Islamic entities but also on countries that could foster or otherwise encourage hardline Islamist sentiment. Notable in this regard is Malaysia, where a more radical, "enabling" environment could emerge if divisions within the Malay community widen as a result of domestic political instability.

Give greater attention to identifying and supporting conventional and nonconventional broadcasting and message-delivery systems that can be effectively utilized in a multilayered communication strategy aimed at countering the proselytizing activities of extremist groups. Properly employed, these conduits could be highly effective in prosecuting the "struggle of ideas"—not least by targeting and influencing those sectors that are most able to bolster the middle ground of political compromise and, through this, foster an environment that is hostile (or at least nonreceptive) to the appeal of violent Islam.