

Focus sharply on terrorism

By Bunn Nagara

Containing terrorists and eliminating terrorism as their violence spreads in the region is challenging enough, without distractions that complicate the fight against them.

THE terrorist threat in South-East Asia has officially worsened since 2015 with a focus on Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia.

However, it would be presumptive to suggest a steady deterioration of security throughout these countries. No clear evidence indicates the terrorist threat in this region has worsened overall.

The situation has evolved over the past 17 years, differing in operational form while sharing certain trends between the different countries. A better understanding of the threat will benefit work in countering it.

Given the sheer expanse of the Indonesian archipelago, terrorist cells and training camps operate with greater discretion and impunity around the country. This factor also impacts on militant activity between neighbouring countries.

The authoritarian regime of former President Suharto had kept a lid on Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) for example. It jailed extremist leaders like Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar, who upon release in 1982 moved to Malaysia.

Their activities then were limited to propagating the extremist JI agenda, recruitment and indoctrination, falling short of violent activity. After the Suharto regime's collapse in 1998, both men returned to Indonesia and Abdullah established links with al Qaeda.

This resulted in the Bali bombings of 2002, which killed 202 people and injured another 209. For many, that ignited the current series of transnational terrorist attacks in the region.

The triple bombings, notably the car bomb in a van, had the hallmark of al Qaeda in sheer scale, something not matched since. JI military leader Hambali confirmed al Qaeda's sponsorship of the attack, and the FBI confirmed the link.

The popular theory goes that the Bali bombings triggered the campaign of terrorist attacks around the region first linked to al Qaeda, then to Da'esh (Islamic State or IS). But the situation on the ground is not so simple.

Basically, there are three ways in which transnational terrorist attacks occur: financial sponsorship as in Bali 2002, the influx of foreign fighters, and the foreign training then return home of local fighters.

Being merely "inspired" by the distant terrorist acts of al Qaeda or IS does not constitute an active link. Simply claiming "allegiance" to either group abroad, or for the groups to claim stewardship of the attacks, need not indicate a meaningful link either.

Naturally, the local militants as well as the foreign terrorist leaders would gain from claiming such a link in boosting their stature. However, taking them at their word in presuming such linkage does not help in understanding the threat or assisting police work against it.

In fact, assuming such linkages can detract from forensic investigations to trace the immediate origins of the threat and the local sources of radicalisation. That the majority of the threats in this region are lately of this nature makes this point even more pertinent.

The Indonesian terrorist cell Katibah Gonggong Rebus is a case in point. Comprising only a few members, they had the outlandish idea of attacking Singapore by firing a rocket from Batam island into Marina Bay resort.

Indonesian police arrested most members of the group in August last year with assistance from Singapore authorities. But there are other such smaller groups with no direct or any link at all to IS or al Qaeda.

In April this year, a shootout between Indonesian police and local militants in East Java resulted in the deaths of six militants. Their haphazard “plan” consisted of driving up to a police post and opening fire.

The plan failed and they were pursued by police in a car chase instead. The militants then abandoned their vehicle and fled on foot, only to be gunned down.

Another terrorist attack on Java island last month had a suicide bomber killing three policemen at a bus station. These Java attacks were traced to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), a local group said to be “linked” to IS.

The JAD is a recent development – reportedly an umbrella grouping of about 20 local militant groups pledging allegiance to IS. But the JAD’s constituents are essentially local, such as a splinter faction of the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), itself a splinter of JI.

What exactly – if anything – constitutes an operational link to IS remains unclear, since the Indonesian police are not telling. Like various other cases, it may not amount to anything more than the group’s or IS’s claim of such a link.

Continued presumption of this linkage in the absence of hard evidence leads to another problem: the lack of attention to the spread of radicalisation locally. This happens to be a particular problem for Indonesia now.

After April’s shootout, President Joko Widodo had an emergency meeting with his country’s head of counter-terrorism Gen Suhardi Alius. Among the main issues they discussed was the lack of national coordination among provincial authorities and between the provinces and Jakarta.

Some 500 convicted terrorists have been released in Indonesia after serving their prison terms, with about the same number now fighting abroad. A significant number of the released inmates have since returned to their old violent ways, coming to the notice of the authorities only after committing new attacks.

The outstanding lack of coordination among the provinces thus becomes that much more alarming. And the problem is not limited to Indonesia, as militants travel quietly and freely in the region.

On June 1, Singapore’s Home Ministry released the Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017. The city state has now had to face the most intense threats from terrorist attacks and the report duly acknowledges that.

Some of these threats are internal, generated within Singapore itself. But that dimension of the threat remains minimal.

A greater element of the threats confronting Singapore is from within the region, rather than from militant groups and leaders in Iraq or Syria. The report does not adequately distinguish between any

operational linkages with them, whether real or simply implied and assumed, and working linkages with regional terrorist groups and individuals.

An example concerns Isnilon Hapilon, the Philippines' most wanted militant, an Abu Sayyaf leader who had "pledged allegiance" to IS. To promote his image and career he has claimed to head "IS East Asia," and in turn IS has proclaimed him its "emir" in the Philippines.

Thus the IS franchise seems to be established in the Philippines and the region. However, the reality and extent of the operational link again remains unclear.

Last week, Philippine authorities reported the presence of Indonesian militants among local fighters of the Maute terrorist group. The JAD had apparently assigned dozens of militants to Mindanao to widen the regional franchise.

They aim to exploit the militant and criminal opportunities in the southern Philippines to maximise their impact in each country and the region. As a response, the Indonesian army has beefed up its presence in Kalimantan, North Maluku and Sulawesi.

Regional militants are reportedly trying to make Marawi in the province of Lanao del Sur a regional base. As the battle raged throughout the week, Philippine forces claimed control of 90% of Marawi by Friday night.

Regional militants have targeted Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand as ripe for attack. These five original Asean countries clearly need to work more cohesively to eliminate the threat swiftly and comprehensively.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.