

## Terrorism in the Asia – Pacific Region: Contained But Still A Threat

22<sup>nd</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable

4 June 2008

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Bronson Percival

In the new century, several societies and governments in Southeast Asia have contended with a surge in violence linked to extremism on the fringe of Muslim communities.<sup>1</sup> This violence – of which terrorism is a part – has complex and diverse origins. Some of this violence has been linked to international terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda, some to regional organizations such as the Jema'ah Islamiyah, and some to insurgencies by marginalized minorities fighting for an ethnic homeland. To design effective counter-measures, it was crucial to distinguish among the motivations of the different organizations that used violence.<sup>2</sup> On the whole, Southeast Asian authorities have been adept at doing this, as have their partners from outside the region. The result is that Southeast Asia stands out – among other regions of the world – for its relative success at containing and then diminishing terrorism.

However, before Southeast Asia is offered as a model, it would be useful to examine the experience of the past seven years to identify lessons learned. No purpose is served if we

---

<sup>1</sup> South Asia suffers from terrorism conducted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, terrorism and safehavens for terrorists in parts of Pakistan, and a series of terrorist bombings in India, most recently in the city of Jaipur in May 2008. Chinese authorities have been concerned about the potential for terrorism by several Muslim minority groups, at least one of which has been designated as a terrorist organization.

<sup>2</sup> “Terrorists deliberately and systematically target civilians in pursuit of non-negotiable goals... Insurgent movements with negotiable demands, political infrastructure, popular constituencies and territorial control are less likely to depend on terrorist tactics and are more readily held to account for their actions, especially when engaged in peace processes.” The Philippines: Counter-Insurgency vs. Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao,” *International Crisis Group Asia Report*, Number 152, May 14, 2008, p. 2.

conflate the recent histories of terrorism, counter-terrorism, and insurgencies in Asia with those in the Middle East, or if we mix up our dates, for example 2003 with 2008.

Moreover, it is essential to focus not on the capture of specific terrorists, as important as that may be, but on the big picture – how states cooperate to contain, de-legitimize, and then minimize terrorism. In other words, the focus should be on the strategic, not the tactical, level.

### **Southeast Asia Faced a Serious Threat**

A convention is to date the “war on terrorism” from September 11, 2001 and to argue that the threat of international terrorism was brought home to most Southeast Asians by the Bali terrorist bombing of October 2002. The reality is that Southeast Asians were well acquainted with political violence, including by Muslim extremists, long before these events. Al Qaeda’s presence in Southeast Asia pre-dated 9/11, though it had not successfully carried out terrorist attacks in the region. Minority grievances in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, which had historically burst into armed insurgencies, had been not been resolved. Indonesia suffered a long-standing revolt in Aceh and communal conflict erupted between Muslims and Christians in parts of Indonesia as the new century dawned. In addition, between September 11 and the first Bali bombing, governments began to learn more about a Southeast Asian Muslim extremist organization, the unfortunately named Jema’ah Islamiyah (JI), some of whose leaders had links to al Qaeda. The difference between 2001 and 2003, was that the links between local, regional and international extremists were uncovered and explored.

## **Success through Cooperation**

When these ties and the extent of the threat in Southeast Asia began to be unveiled, key regional states and other concerned countries needed to sort out a division of labor.

Regional states did not share common perceptions of the nature or relative importance of the threat, and each country had its own interests and concerns about domestic reactions. Southeast Asian elites insisted they did not want the U.S. to see the region purely through a terrorism lens, but also continued to worry about Washington's long-term commitment to the region.

In Indonesia, recovering from the Asian Financial Crisis and in the midst of a chaotic transition to democracy, countering terrorism ranked low as a national priority.

Moreover, the Indonesian government of the time was in a state of denial about terrorism, only broken after a series of costly bombings in Bali and elsewhere in the archipelago.

Some politicians coddled Islamic extremists, including those subsequently linked to terrorist attacks or plans, while other Indonesians worried that counter-terrorism would be used as an excuse to overturn hard won protections for human rights and democracy.<sup>3</sup>

However, bombings and other terrorist attacks, which shifted to Jakarta, alienated the Indonesian public. The election of a President in 2004 who understood terrorism's threat to democracy, and improved police capabilities also allowed Indonesia to adopt its own

---

<sup>3</sup>Vice President, Hamzah Haz, said the death of 3,000 people at the World Trade Center would help "cleanse America of its sins."

approach to counter-terrorism. The courts have now tried and jailed hundreds of violent extremists, and undermined the legitimacy of terrorism in the eyes of Indonesians.

Among other key Southeast Asian states, national perceptions have differed but been more consistent over time. Singapore immediately identified terrorism the primary threat to the nation's security. The Philippines also joined in the common effort, and agreed that the U.S. military footprint should be confined to advisors to the Filipino armed forces in their campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group, not against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Washington and Bangkok agreed that the U.S. had no role to play in confronting the insurgency among the Malay minority in southern Thailand. Despite domestic political considerations, Malaysia aggressively detained JI members and ultimately closed down al Qaeda back office operations. Responsibility for maritime security in the Strait of Malacca was eventually gathered in the hands of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

In sum, despite different interests and different perceptions, Southeast Asian states and their U.S. and Australian partners learned to work effectively together to contain and then roll-back violent extremism and terrorism.

### **The Myth of American Insensitivity**

In the past six years, primarily as a consequence of cooperation against terrorism, many Southeast Asian governments have significantly expanded their relations with the U.S.

At the same time, popular antagonism to American policies in Iraq, particularly among the region's Muslims, was and remains strong. One consequence is the tendency to confuse U.S. actions and policy in different parts of the world. This has led to a curious myth, that Southeast Asian countries resisted "one-size fits all" counter-terrorism policies pressed upon them by the United States.<sup>4</sup> The facts don't support the myth.

In fact, in Southeast Asia U.S. efforts to counter terrorism were based, first and foremost, on cooperation with regional states, for several reasons. First, Southeast Asia was not considered so close to the heart of the U.S. campaign against international terrorism as to require a large military response, but not so secondary that terrorist links could be ignored. Second, with resources already stretched due to commitments elsewhere, Washington distinguished between international terrorism and insurgencies by ethnic minorities. It did not want to be dragged into these insurgencies. Thus, in Southeast Asia the U.S. both chose and was forced to be acutely sensitive to the concerns of individual national elites. This was particularly true prior to the election of a new President in Indonesia, when the United States still had reasons to fear al Qaeda's remaining ties to the region.

By 2005, U.S. attention at senior policy levels to terrorism in Southeast Asia was fading. However, by that time, all Southeast Asian countries realized they were faced with a serious problem. Intelligence professionals, police and diplomats were working closely together and with their foreign counterparts. The US encouraged the peaceful resolution

---

<sup>4</sup> The myth is based on conflating US policies in Asia and the Middle East, and mixing up time lines. For example, see Amitav Acharya and Arabinda Archarya, The Myth of the Second Front: Localizing the 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia, *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2007, pp. 75-90.

of insurgencies in the Indonesian province of Aceh and in the southern Philippines, and provided substantial disaster-relief and economic assistance. As confidence grew in Washington, countering terrorism ceased to hold center stage as the central organizing issue for US policy in the region, and the American counter-terrorism message was toned down. Cooperation, supplemented with U.S. and Australian assistance, continues through a number of little publicized programs, and government-to-government relations have generally improved. It is not U.S. policies in Asia but rather U.S. policies in the Middle East, that anger many Muslims (and others) in Asia.

### **Terrorism in 2008**

There has been no public information in the past several years that would suggest that al Qaeda retains a foothold in Southeast Asia, or elsewhere in the Asia Pacific region.

The Southeast Asian regional Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI) organization had links to Al Qaeda. Many of those links were cut with the capture of al Qaeda and JI operatives, particularly in 2003. It is not clear whether ties remain, though some experts believe one faction of the JI may retain tenuous ties. The JI's known links outside the Asia Pacific region were to Pakistan.

Although planning for subsequent attacks was underway, the last major terrorist attack in Indonesia took place in Bali in 2005.

The JI is under pressure due to the detention, arrest, trial or death of more than 400 of its members in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It is widely believed that Malaysian and Singaporean authorities have “closed down” JI in their countries. In Indonesia, the degraded JI network is now largely confined to Java, while a few members have sought refuge in the southern Philippines. A year ago, the International Crisis Group estimated that JI retains 900 committed members. Perhaps as many as 400 have passed through Indonesian courts, though many have been released after short sentences. We do not know whether JI members who have been detained or convicted tend to sever their former ties or return to the network. The former leader of JI, Abu Bakr Bashir, has been released from jail and an Indonesian court has overturned his convictions. Though an Indonesian court has recently ruled that the JI is an “illegal organization,” it is not banned in Indonesia.

Most of the JI is now concentrating on regrouping and dakwah. New recruitment is reportedly less organized and formalized, and training of new recruits is increasingly rushed. There is debate among experts about factionalism within the organization, and about the commitment to violence in pursuit of JI’s aims. Noordin Top leads a faction that is still focused on implementing terrorism, but there is no agreement on how rigid factional lines are within the organization. As a consequence of revulsion within Indonesia at the deaths caused by terrorism and sectarian murders in Poso and the Maluku islands, as well as the pressure brought by a new police anti-terrorism unit, debate within JI about the utility and costs of violence in pursuit of the goal of an Islamic state has come out into the open.

The extent and depth of passive support for the JI is difficult to measure. JI members have connections and relationships with a wide variety of extremist organizations, and a network based on schooling at a number of boarding schools and family ties. Polling data between 2002 and 2007 showed that at least 10% of the populations in Malaysia and Indonesia said they believed suicide bombing was at least justified “sometimes,” though the percentage has been falling steadily in Indonesia over this time frame.

### **Terrorists Links to Insurgency in 2008**

Minorities in the southern Philippines and Thailand may use terrorist attacks in pursuit of their goals, but their goals are fundamentally different than those of international or regional terrorists networks. They are, in that sense, closer to the former Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), whose insurgency in the Indonesian province of Aceh ended after an accord was reached between the Indonesian government and the organization’s leaders following the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. No evidence linked GAM with international or regional terrorist organizations. Although some experts believe the technical sophistication of the insurgents in southern Thailand indicates AQ or JI links to the conflict, no public evidence for such connections is available. A small number of JI members are widely believed to have found refuge with the remnants of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) or with factions of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)



in the southern Philippines.<sup>5</sup> Their future depends on broader political considerations and negotiations between the MILF and the government of the Philippines.

### **Explanations for Southeast Asia's Success**

Among terrorism experts, there appear to be two main explanations for the defeat of terrorists:

- A) International and regional terrorists were gradually contained, largely through detentions or arrests in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, which slowly confined the threat to Indonesia. Particularly after the election of a new President in Indonesia in 2004, Jakarta gave new attention to terrorism and arrested and tried hundreds of violent Islamic extremists.
- B) Indonesia was always the key. The JI overplayed its hand through bombing attacks and by stoking religious conflict. Indonesia found its own way, in accordance with its own transition to democracy, to counter terrorism. Its approach, to capture and then bring those associated with violent crimes to the courts, may not have been as efficient as detention of known terrorists, but it de-legitimized terrorism.
- C) In addition, restraint and cooperation by and among governments was also crucial. On the whole, governments did not overplay their hands, provoking a backlash.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The MILF has consistently denied that it provides sanctuary for JI members, or members of other radical Indonesian organizations such as KOMPAK.

## Remaining Challenges

- The use of armed force by the United States in an attempt to quell insurgencies in Iraq fuels distrust and anger among many Asians. Polling data consistently demonstrates a badly tarnished American image in the Asia Pacific region. Increasingly, the evidence suggests that Muslims in Southeast Asia pay more attention to events in the Middle East, and are more concerned about American policies there than in Asia. Despite excellent government-to-government relations, popular antagonism to the US is one (of many) factor that influences how governments in Southeast Asia approach Islamic extremism in their countries.<sup>7</sup>
- The insurgency in several provinces of southern Thailand, where the Malay (and thus Muslim) minority is concentrated, is a particularly sensitive issue in Malaysia. It is also more opaque than other insurgencies, and more lethal. More than 3,000 people have died. New efforts since 2006 to ameliorate Malay grievances have not reduced the violence. There is no convincing public evidence that al Qaeda or the JI have exploited this tragedy, but the involvement of these terrorist organizations would add a new and more threatening dimension to the conflict.

---

<sup>6</sup> Many experts believe the Taksin regime's reaction to the beginning of the current insurgency in southern Thailand was heavy-handed and counterproductive.

<sup>7</sup> Additional measures to lower the U.S. profile in countering terrorism in the Asia – Pacific region may be useful, but marginal. For example, now that the ASG is confined to remnants driven into the jungles, some experts have suggested that the U.S. advisors to the Armed Forces of the Philippines could be withdrawn. Another declaration of a “mission accomplished” may, however, prove premature, and it would not directly address public perceptions in the region, which are focused on the Middle East.

- The accord between Manila and the MILF, which has largely kept the peace in the southern Philippines, is under pressure. Negotiations have stalled. Malaysia has announced that it will withdraw its observers, and has already begun to do so. Armed conflict might tempt factions in the MILF to turn to international or regional terrorists for support, though they have little ability to provide assistance. A resort to violence would not be in the interest of Manila's neighbors or the MILF, which needs to again collaborate with Manila to bring pressure on the remaining foreign terrorists who have found sanctuary in the southern Philippines.

- Indonesia has a constructive model of how to manage the transition from dictatorship to democracy while also bringing violent extremists to trial and providing space for legitimate non-violent activities. On the other hand, JI and some of the other violent extremists groups are down but not out, and their members have either escaped trial or received such short sentences from the courts that they have not been reformed. Nonetheless, Indonesia might consider providing advice to other Muslim majority countries outside the Asia – Pacific region on how to simultaneously manage a terrorist threat and a transition to democracy.

- Although there is no direct link between poverty and terrorism, a global economic recession and continuing inflation in the prices of basic necessities, especially food, could challenge the legitimacy of governments and lead to new recruits for extremist organizations, if not necessarily to violence.



