Terrorism vs. Political Violence in Southeast Asia: Trends, Threat, Responses

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Terrorism analysts generally make it their business to advise that the threat of terrorism is serious and urgent. Six years after authorities in Singapore first announced that they had discovered an international terrorist network operating in the region, it is not difficult to find assessments that proclaim 'the worsening of the radicalization and terrorist threat in Southeast Asia' (Singh 2007: 3). Such claims are made despite hundreds of arrests for terrorism-related offences, and the death or capture of most known leaders associated with high-profile terrorist incidents in the region. In the alarmist reading of events, crackdowns simply produce more sympathy, while the ideological radicalization underlying violent extremism continues to spread. New recruits and sympathisers take the place of those arrested, and hydra-headed terrorist organizations renew their ranks, recycle released militants, and extend their networks and proselytizing among sympathetic societal groups.

This vision resonates with a cursory reading of global terrorism trends. According to the American government's official tally of people killed, injured or kidnapped as a result of terror attacks worldwide, the figure for 2007 – at 72, 066 – was not much reduced from preceding years, and the number of terror attacks continued to rise: from 11,156 in 2005, to 14,570 in 2006 and 14,499 in 2007 (Department of State 2008). From such perspectives, the war on terrorism will indeed be a 'long war', to use the terminology of the 2006 U.S. *Quadrennial Defense Review*, with the disconcerting implication that the world must remain endlessly on a war-footing.

Fortunately, the situation in Southeast Asia does not warrant being seen in these terms. Neither, in all likelihood, does the global situation. After all, the rise in terror attacks and casualties globally is dominated by incidents in Iraq (6, 212 attacks

and 44, 008 casualties in 2007, compared to 3,469 attacks and 20, 731 casualties in 2005) and Afghanistan (1,127 attacks and 4, 673 casualties in 2007, compared to 491 and 1, 540 respectively in 2005). That these two locations are where the "war on terror" is being waged most aggressively should suggest that more of the same in any 'long war' is likely to produce even more disastrous results.

These examples should serve as a warning to Southeast Asia that waging the wrong war carries consequences that are unacceptable in any accounting, human or financial. If we are to understand what kind of threats the region actually faces, and therefore what kind of responses are appropriate, a number of key distinctions and acknowledgements are essential. As elaborated below, the first is the distinction between terrorism and other forms of political violence, insurgency in particular. The second is the distinction between the ideological framing of violence and its underlying causes. The third involves distinguishing between what governments realistically can and cannot achieve in their counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency strategies.

These distinctions point to a very different conclusion regarding the threat of terrorism than is presented in alarmist accounts. As a recent overview of security threats in the region has argued, international terrorism was always a limited threat in Southeast Asia, essentially involving one loose organization, the Jemaah Islamiyah, which the governments of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia cracked down on from 2002 onwards. While there could of course be attacks in future, 'the fact is that the JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] today is to all intents and purposes decimated' (Jawhar 2008: 1). The next sections elaborate this finding, placing it in the context of a broader range of incidents of political violence, some of which are indeed severe and immediate.

Terrorism, Insurgency and Political Violence

Calculating the risk of future acts of terrorist violence is notoriously difficult, and even the largest, most well-resourced intelligence agencies in the world frequently get it wrong. However, while it is impossible to predict accurately the location and timing of the next terrorist incident, it is possible to review trends, and locate current incident-prone hot spots. Figures from a widely-used database on terrorism, the 'Global Terrorism Database', formerly maintained by RAND and now housed at the University of Maryland in the U.S., show a very sharp rise in terrorist incidents in Southeast Asia after 1998. Combined with a few high-profile incidents

and arrests since 2001, the apparent rise in terrorism in Southeast Asia led to the region being labelled the 'second front' in the U.S.-led 'war on terror' and triggered an outpouring of commentary and so-called expert studies on terrorism and terrorist groups in the region. I have argued elsewhere that much of this material needs to be treated with caution (Hamilton-Hart 2005), and others have noted that the rise in terrorism after 1999 registered in the GTD databases coincides with a methodological shift in how these databases were constructed. From 1968 to 1997, the first GTD logged only 'international' terrorist incidents (where the primary target is foreign), while from 1998 the second GTD also logged 'domestic' terrorism, thus magnifying the rise in terrorism since then by capturing the large number of attacks attributed to long-running insurgencies in some countries (Croissant and Kneip 2005: 16-18).[1]

If we look only at the GTD2 figures from 1999 onwards, it is evident that incidents of terrorism in Southeast Asia are highly concentrated in three countries: the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.[2] Outside of these three countries, recorded terrorism is at very low levels in Southeast Asia. Since 2004, Thailand has overtaken Indonesia in terms of the number and seriousness of terrorist incidents: while Indonesia has not registered a major terrorist incident for nearly three years (since the market bombing in Poso in May 2005, which killed 22, and the second attacks in Bali in October 2005, which killed 20), the number of deaths in Southern Thailand since conditions there worsened in 2004 is now over 3,000.[3] The Philippines, meanwhile, continues to be by far the most terrorism-prone country in the region, if we use either the GTD2 or U.S. Department of State records. We can conclude, therefore, that most of what gets registered as terrorism in Southeast Asia is currently taking place in Thailand and the Philippines. We should take a closer look at incidents in both countries.

In both Thailand and the Philippines, much of what gets reported as terrorism is associated with the separatist insurgencies that both countries face in their southern

[1] For example, GTD2 lists attacks by GAM (the Acehnese separatist group in conflict with the Indonesian government until the peace process of 2005) and the MILF (one of the separatist groups in the Southern Philippines) as terrorist incidents.

[2] GTD2 figures for 1999-2004 (figures to the end of 2007 will only be loaded into the database at the end of May 2008) register the following incidents for each country: Cambodia – 18; Indonesia – 215; Laos – 8; Malaysia – 3; Myanmar – 18; Philippines – 380; Thailand – 71; Singapore – 0; Timor Leste 1; Vietnam 1.

[3] The death toll varies by source. In October 2007, the International Crisis Group estimated the numbers killed since January 2004 at over 2,600; while press accounts in May 2008 referred to 'over 3,000' deaths. Casualties continued to mount in the October-May period, and may account for most of the discrepancy.

regions. A proper account of the conflicts in these two areas is by no means possible here, but it can be noted that they are rooted in control over territory, resources and the use of governmental authority. In both conflicts, ethno-religious cleavages have coincided with relative economic and political marginalization of a minority group that is territorially concentrated at the geographic periphery of the country. Although both conflicts have long histories, it is important to note that the violence associated with them has fluctuated over time, with significant intervals of relative peace prevailing at various times.[4]

The insurgencies in both the Philippines and Thailand have fostered terrorism, and insurgent groups have also carried out acts of terrorism, but it is vital not to conflate terrorism with insurgency. In the CIA's definition, an insurgency:

> 'is a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity—including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and political mobilization, for example, propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity—is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy. The common denominator of most insurgent groups is their desire to control a particular area. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations, whose objectives do not include the creation of an alternative government capable of controlling a given area or country' (cited in Byman 2006: 84).

Terrorism should thus be seen as a tactic sometimes associated with insurgency (and, as we shall see, other forms of conflict), rather than the exclusive preserve of so-called 'terrorist groups'. While a few groups, generally those lacking the strength to use other forms of warfare or political mobilization, make use of terrorist tactics to the virtual exclusion of all others, more often terrorist action is one tactic among a broader repertoire of tactics, violent and non-violent, which groups may employ. It is worth noting that governments, and groups that later acquired governmental status, have employed terrorist tactics at various times. If we consider even briefly who has actually used terrorist tactics, from the founders of the state of Israel to those fighting for the independence of what was French Algeria, from the U.S. and its wartime allies to the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army, leftwing European groups, and Tamils fighting for a separate state in Sri Lanka, we see that terror been employed by actors ranging across the ideological and political spectrum, with many being either aspiring or actual governmental authorities.

[4] For overviews that provide historical and analytic perspectives, see Collier 2005, McCargo 2006.

'Purely terrorist organizations', to use the CIA's phrase, are not the principal perpetrators of terrorism or political violence in Southeast Asia. In the conflict areas of Thailand and the Philippines, groups that lie closer to the 'purely terrorist' end of the spectrum – in the sense of having only a limited discernable political agenda or negotiable set of demands – do exist. But it is important to note that they operate in contexts marked by extended insurgent conflicts, which in many senses provide conducive conditions for terrorism. There can be considerable overlap and fluidity among different groups, but the distinction between terrorism as a tactic and the broader nature of an insurgency is critical.

A recent report based on interviews on the ground in the conflict area of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, notes that aggressive, military counter-terrorism actions that do not make this distinction can in fact provoke cooperation and closer alliances between insurgent groups (principally the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and a breakaway armed faction of the Moro National Liberation Front) and those that come closer to meeting the narrower designation of being a terrorist organization, such as the Abu Sayaff Group (ICG 2008). The report argues strongly that cooperation with the insurgent groups, a revival of the peace process, and ultimately a political settlement are necessary for effective counter-terrorism, as well as effective resolution of the insurgency. Despite some significant short term victories claimed as a result of U.S.-supported Philippine military actions, the damage done in the process suggests the gains may be short-lived. The projected withdrawal of Malaysia's military peace monitors from Mindanao later this year, due to lack of progress in the peace process, marks a further deterioration in the prospects for reducing violence on the ground, and for a lasting peace settlement in a conflict that has claimed an estimated 120,000 lives over the last 40 years.

In Thailand's southern border provinces the nature of the conflict is much more opaque, but what we do know of it suggests that the insurgent element – in the sense of having a political agenda and a negotiable set of demands – is much less developed than in the southern Philippines. This is not a good thing. Groups responsible for much of the violence remain shadowy, with no agreement as to which organizations are behind it, or even the degree to which any clearly structured organization with the capacity or willingness to enter into negotiations is responsible (Askew 2007). Accounts of the violence in the Thai South point to multiple actors involved: killings, bombings, intimidation and other acts of violence have been

carried out by young men who have broken out of the control of both traditional village social constraints and the older, more recognizably insurgent, separatist organizations. Also implicated in several accounts are criminal actors with interests in the illegal economy and alleged ties to elements within the state security forces and political actors. A number of different civilian but state-sponsored paramilitaries add another set of armed actors into the mix, alongside the Thai military and police forces, who are responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial deaths and disappearances, as well as the notorious death of 78 unarmed men while in custody in October 2004.[5] As the disorder escalates, violence increasingly becomes the currency of control at the local level.

Viewed from this angle, the situation in Southern Thailand is instructive, as it points to a broader category of political violence: violence that may include terrorism and insurgency but extends to other forms of ideologically or politically motivated attacks on civilian life or infrastructure. Such violence is only very selectively, if at all, incorporated into terrorism databases. In Southeast Asia, cases include state terrorism in Myanmar, were state violence targeting civilians, particularly ethnic and religious minorities, has produced more than 250,000 refugees (Islam 2007); communal violence in Indonesia, especially in the years 1999-2004; and political murders and extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, which have recently risen to levels unprecedented since the worst of the martial law years.[6] These cases of violence are, by all normal metrics, far more serious threats to civilian life in Southeast Asia than conventionally-defined terrorism.

Enabling Conditions, Root Causes, and Ideological Framing

Widening a survey of terrorism to include a broader range of cases of political violence does more than put into perspective the relatively small number of high

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[5] Human Rights Watch, '"It Was Like Suddenly My Son No Longer Existed": Enforced Disappearances in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces', March 2007, http://hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0307/. Human Rights Watch, 'No One Is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces', August 2007, http://hrw.org/reports/2007/thailand0807/. ICG, 'Southern Thailand: The Problem with Paramilitaries.' Asia Report No. 140, 23 October 2007.

[6] Jennifer Franco and Patricio Abinales, 'Again, They're Killing Peasants in the Philippines', *Critical Asian Studies*, 39 (2), 2007, pp. 315 – 328; Amnesty International, 'Philippines: Political Killings, Human Rights and the Peace Process', ASA 35/006/2006, 15 August 2006, http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa350062006; Human Rights Watch, 'Scared Silent: Impunity for Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines', June 2007, http://hrw.org/reports/2007/philippines0607/.

profile terrorist bombings against Western targets in Southeast Asia. First, as noted above, much of what gets counted as terrorism is closely linked to insurgencies in the region, and understanding terrorism in these areas requires an understanding of the dynamics of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Secondly, examining other cases of political violence also helps pinpoint key conditions that make terrorist tactics – or the use of violence against civilians – more likely.

While talking about the 'causes' of terrorism can raise expectations about the degree to which we can realistically hope to predict the use of terrorist tactics, understanding the use of these tactics – the purposes they are meant to serve and the conditions that favour their use – is important, because terrorist violence is not random, irrational or purposeless (Jenkins 2003). On the other hand, it is clear that the 'root causes' of terrorism cannot be reduced simply to conditions such as poverty, marginalization or injustice experienced by those who employ terrorist tactics. As a recent survey of the empirical correlates of terrorism has found, individuals responsible for terrorism are rarely particularly economically or otherwise personally deprived. Rather, 'if there is an association between terrorism and inequalities among regional or religious groups, it still seems that terrorist individuals are more motivated by the injustice they perceive around themselves than by personal grievances' (Kivimaki 2007: 56).

One does not have to look hard to identify the injustices that many groups associated with recent acts of terrorism perceive around them: they are readily recounted in the literature put out by these groups, their sympathizers, and the testimonies of many convicted for terrorism-related offences. Jemaah Islamiyah members and groups with similar goals, for example, have written and published extensively on the corruption and religious laxity of the Indonesian political establishment, on the war crimes of the U.S. and its allies since 2001, on the anti-Muslim nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, on the persistent injustices suffered by Palestinians, and on the evils of capitalism and globalization, often personified (or demonized) as an essentially hostile and aggressive West (e.g. Ahnaf 2005; Samudra 2004; ICG 2008). In contrast, the grievances articulated by insurgent groups in both southern Thailand and southern Philippines tend to be more localized (and MILF has taken pains to distance itself from anything that sounds like an endorsement of Al Qaeda-style anti-Americanism), although there are some strands of similarity in the language and religious framing of these conflicts (Liow 2006).

There is some dispute about whether these grievances are actually motivating factors behind terrorist violence, or whether they are simply pretexts used to mobilize support. Not surprisingly, those who have been held responsible for the injustices in explanatory accounts of terrorist actions are quick to denounce the grievances as more rhetorical devices. The leaders of both the United Kingdom and the U.S., for example, have repeatedly denied that there are any legitimate grievances behind recent anti-Western terrorism, which they insist has nothing to do with any of the abuses associated with the 'war on terror' or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such denials are not only obviously contestable, they miss much of what is at issue, as grievances may be very much related to acts of terrorism, *even if* they do not directly inspire them:

> 'even as excuses or ways of legitimizing terrorism, these grievances can play a role. The explanation of individual motivations does not mean that independent variables simply determine the behaviour of terrorist individuals. Individual motivations are tied with the social processes of the legitimation of terrorist violence. …Without the perceived legitimacy, based on international grievances, these individuals could not see terrorism as a way of achieving their narcissistic goals of heroism (Kivimaki 2007: 58).

Individuals willing to kill – and in some cases to die – for a cause obviously have to believe they are doing something worthwhile, that their cause is just and, at least among a certain group, perceived to be so. To this extent, all grievances and causes are 'ideological' in that they depend on the values and perspective of the aggrieved. It is a serious mistake, however, to conclude that the actions and problems giving rise to grievances are themselves manufactured constructs, or that those with whom such grievances resonate have fallen victim to some kind of fanaticism. As recent review of findings regarding suicide terrorism concludes:

> 'it [suicide terrorism] is not rooted in psychopathology or fanaticism or indeed in any single cause such as deprivation, religious belief, or frustration. It is an adaptable and controllable tactic. It has an instrumental value for an organization. Despite impressions of ubiquity, its popularity and effectiveness are limited (Crenshaw 2007: 160).

Unfortunately, identifying religious radicalism as significantly associated with terrorism is a mistake that is all too common among analysts of contemporary terrorism, many of whom have placed increasing emphasis on what they call the ideological foundations of terrorism: religious extremism, radicalization or fanaticism.

Religious views that fall outside the mainstream do characterise some (but clearly not all) individuals accused or convicted of terrorism. It is an error, however,

to confuse the ideological framing of acts of terrorism with the underlying sources of grievance. Even a cursory look at what has been called 'radical' in the current climate should make it clear that equating radicalism with a propensity to use or support terrorist violence simply does not match reality. Purist or revivalist forms of religion, social conservatism, a desire to live under religious law, and anti-American anger have all been identified as 'radical' and dangerous by leading government figures in several countries, and by many analysts of terrorism (Hamilton-Hart 2005). These beliefs, however, are most definitely not limited to groups associated with terrorism. Depending on how 'radical' is defined, several of these beliefs are relatively widely shared, and include those who have expressly condemned the use of terrorist tactics. In Indonesia, for example, self-identified purist or Salafy groups should for the most part be seen as allies in the fight against terrorism, not threatening incubators of terrorism (ICG 2004). Seeing purist beliefs as precursors or enablers of terrorism is dangerously counter-productive: it is almost guaranteed to alienate significant sections of the population against counter-terrorism efforts, it plays into the hands of violently extremist groups, and it misses the more important enabling factors behind terrorism.[7]

If we return to the instrumental value of terrorism – the reasons why groups employ terrorist tactics – we can see that perceptions of strategic utility matter more than religious belief. Common purposes include using terrorist acts to convey a message, to demonstrate a capacity to act, to acquire power, to sow disorder, to provoke harsh governmental responses, and to engender a lack of confidence in government (Jenkins 2003). These are all strategic rationales; but, like other strategists, terrorist groups may make mistakes: an action that was meant to lead to one outcome may end up producing the reverse effect. What we know of the Bali bombings, for example, suggests that they were intended to inspire others to join their cause, but in fact tended to alienate much of the intended audience. Recent studies of Jemaah Islamiyah point to a sharp division of opinion within the group, with a majority now appearing to believe that terrorist tactics are not useful in furthering the group's aims and preferring to concentrate on proselytizing activities such as publishing. While this may be considered 'deradicalization' – in the sense that it means a retreat from terrorist tactics – it certainly does not necessarily involve

[7] For an elaboration of this argument, see Hamilton-Hart 2007.

abandoning either the religious outlook or the ultimate aims of the group, which remain deeply hostile to secularism, globalization and the U.S. (ICG 2007; ICG 2008).

Many factors are likely to affect whether a group believes that terrorism will be useful to it. But we can point to certain enabling or structural factors that make violent tactics more useful, and thus more likely to be employed. These factors become much more apparent if we look at the broader categories of insurgency and political violence, both as contexts which harbour a great deal of what gets counted as terrorism in Southeast Asia, and as tell-tale warning indicators of underlying problems. One major study of insurgencies around the world found that poverty, instability, inaccessible terrain and large population were factors that made a country vulnerable to insurgency (Fearon and Laitin 2003). When we look at places in Southeast Asia where violence against civilians is highest, we see localized breakdowns in law and order due to dysfunctional police, judicial and remand systems, a blurring of the boundaries between government and criminality, and underlying political pathologies. While conventionally-defined terrorism does not necessarily emerge from these conditions, we should regard them as significant enabling factors.

What Should Governments Aim At?

No government can reduce the risk of a terrorist attack to zero. No intelligence service is omniscient, no security apparatus is fail-safe. If one of Southeast Asia's most wanted alleged terrorists can apparently walk out of a detention facility in Singapore, and remain undetected for at least three months thereafter, it should be obvious that no government can control everything within its borders. Terrorism is cheap: not for nothing has it been called the poor man's strategy of warfare. Political assassinations are even cheaper than bombings. To give an indication of prices, the cost of two incidents attributed to JI were estimated as follows: 'The Australian embassy attack in September 2004 cost about $7,800; the assassination of the head of the Central Sulawesi Protestant Church in October 2006 cost about $20.11' (ICG 2007).

In these conditions, it would be foolish not to recognize that the potential for a terrorist attack is always there. Rather than trying to eliminate terrorism, governments should aim at impeding terrorist operations and reducing incentives to employ

terrorist tactics. Some governments have clearly been relatively good at this: parts of the map of Southeast Asia are effectively terrorism-free. Not coincidentally, these are also areas where political violence more generally is at low levels. Underlying both outcomes are effective police forces, intelligence and government organizations that possess internal discipline, capacities for self-restraint and professionalism, buttressed by relatively functional government and political systems. While semi-criminal police forces and predatory, corrupt government systems do not always give rise to conventional terrorism, they provide the conditions for conflict and violence, and certainly impede conventional counter-terrorism.

If we return to the current terrorism hot spots of southern Philippines and southern Thailand, and recognize that insurgencies in both places provide conducive conditions for terrorism, it should be fairly obvious that resolving insurgency is probably the most effective counter-terrorism action that could be pursued. Unfortunately, it is not coincidental that the countries most affected by insurgencies are the ones least equipped to fight them effectively. Insurgencies are fostered by weak, illegitimate, repressive and unstable governments, in 'countries suffering from poverty, injustice, poor civil-military relations', and with 'poorly trained, brutal and corrupt' militaries. Resolving these deficiencies requires a fundamental shift in the distribution and use of political power. Thus, while 'at times the very causes of insurgency also create problems for fighting it', in many cases the reform that would be necessary to address both problems is more threatening to power-holders than the insurgency itself (Byman 2006: 102, 111).

The challenge may seem daunting, but it does contain useful lessons. It implies, first, that effective counter-terrorism rests on traditional law and order strengths of police capacity and self-discipline, a functioning justice system and political accountability. Secondly, it suggests that these same capacities serve to reduce incentives or motivations for terrorism, along with addressing other grievances where possible. Finally, it should alert us to two common pitfalls: a distracting and counter-productive focus on ideology or religion; and excessive infringements of civil liberties.

Because security against terrorism is often presented as involving a trade-off with civil liberties and rights, it is worth pointing out that the trade-off operates only to an extent. Beyond this, the idea that more security for individuals can be bought at the cost of an erosion in civil rights is an illusion. While the violation of civil liberties

and legal rights does not guarantee to worsen grievances, the denial of fundamental rights makes abuses more likely to occur, and therefore sets the stage for the development of grievances. Anyone who has read accounts of what has occurred behind the veil of secret 'rendition' and the denial of legal rights in the current 'war on terror' should not be surprised to learn either that abuses occur in these conditions, or that torture and inhumane detention directly inspire further terrorism.[8]

There is scope for such spillovers or 'blowback' to extend to Southeast Asia. In June 2007, Singapore announced it had apprehended and detained under the Internal Security Act one so-called 'self-radicalized' young lawyer who allegedly had 'traveled abroad in an effort to join an extremist group and fight alongside the Taliban' (Department of State 2008). Whether or not this individual actually intended – or had the capacity – to pursue such a course of action remains uncertain, but it should not be surprising if organizations using terrorist tactics gather some recruits in this way. From a counter-terrorism perspective it is necessary to ask what such cases are symptomatic of. Listening to what those apprehended have to say would be a sensible start. If we are to learn from Southeast Asia's earlier experiences with what was then called 'communist terrorism', the best insight into the aims and motives of these groups came from those who listened seriously to them, rather than dismissing their grievances as mere rhetoric or deluded fanaticism.

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[8] At least 30 former Guantanamo detainees have, in the words of the U.S. government, 'taken part in anti-coalition militant activities after leaving US detention.' As argued in Monbiot 2008, rather than justifying their detention, the accounts of detainees make it clear that the detention practices are not only an intrinsic affront to humanity, they contradict counter-terrorism and security goals.

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