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ASIA PROGRAM

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## Fighting Terrorism on the Southeast Asian Front

**ABSTRACT:** These five essays suggest that U.S.–Southeast Asia relations have improved since the United States launched its war against terrorism, but many potential pitfalls lie ahead. **David Wright-Neville** maintains that corruption, anti-U.S. sentiment, and institutional weakness at the multilateral level may derail meaningful counter-terrorism cooperation in the region. **Angel Rabasa** is more optimistic, implying that U.S. relations with Southeast Asia are deepening and likely to improve—although he points out that under weak governments extremists tend to wield influence that is disproportionate to their numbers. **Sheldon Simon** makes suggestions for improving coordination of efforts but expresses concern that the United States may involve itself too closely in domestic political disputes. **Larry Nicksch** expresses similar concerns and emphasizes the importance of non-military activities such as law enforcement assistance and aid programs that target the fundamental causes of conflicts. **Carolina Hernandez** outlines the links between Philippine extremists and global networks, and also points out that while more than 80 percent of the Philippine public supports U.S. military assistance, resentment may be building among Muslim and other Filipinos.

### Introduction

*Amy McCreedy*

Terrorism is not new to Southeast Asians. What has changed since September 11, 2001, is relations with Washington, which quickly began referring to the region as the “second front” (after Afghanistan) in its war against groups linked to al Qaeda. For Southeast Asian governments, the U.S. war on terror opens up new opportunities and pressures, as they struggle to marshal efforts against extremists while maintaining political support from Muslim populations.

On March 23, the Asia Program sponsored a seminar to look at U.S.–Southeast Asia relations and what has been accomplished in counter-terrorism cooperation. The essays in this Special Report are the result of that event (with an additional paper by David Wright-Neville, who was unable to attend). Collectively, the essays show the sheer complexity and variety of the war on terror, which involves everything from

military training in the Philippines to what the U.S. State Department calls “quiet, nuts-and-bolts support” in the Muslim-majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> As the contributors to this Report make clear, each country and situation requires a different approach, but at the same time efforts must be coordinated across borders to combat enemies who are increasingly sophisticated and internationally linked.

**David Wright-Neville**, senior research fellow at the Global Terrorism Research Project at Monash University in Victoria, Australia, addresses many of the challenges involved in coordinating efforts against well-organized terrorist networks. Generally more pessimistic than the other writers in regard to U.S.–Southeast Asia cooperation, he cites corruption, political expediency, governmental interference and anti-Western rhetoric as major obstacles. Multilateral forums such as APEC should be encouraged, but are too often nothing more than “grandiose statements of intent” because of

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historically embedded rivalries that prevent meaningful intelligence sharing among Southeast Asian governments. For example, Singapore does not want to reveal the extent of its intelligence capabilities for fear of fanning anti-Singaporean sentiment in Malaysia and other neighboring countries. Interaction among security personnel is confined to specific operational issues—“a poor substitute” for the swapping of raw data and joint scenario planning. True cooperation may not last past the “initial burst of enthusiasm,” Wright-Neville fears.

Wright-Neville maintains that Southeast Asian leaders have given terrorist networks a “decade head start.” And now that the leaders have boosted their own positions by scapegoating the United States and contributing to anti-Western rhetoric, how can they be seen cooperating with Washington? Is it realistic to think that counter-terrorism can be depoliticized, especially when major leadership transitions are imminent in several Southeast Asian states? Because of these and other stumbling blocks, cooperation is “unlikely to yield positive long-term benefits.” Wright-Neville recommends that the United States look to itself and concentrate on dealing with Singapore, with which it enjoys a congenial relationship.

**Angel M. Rabasa**, senior policy analyst at RAND, also focuses mainly (though not exclusively) on Indonesia and Malaysia. But while Wright-Neville emphasizes continuity, Rabasa describes new energies that have galvanized the region. Much has been learned about terrorist networks in the past year, he maintains, and ASEAN has revitalized itself as a vehicle for intensified counter-terrorism coop-

eration. He also maintains that “at least from the standpoint of political will, Indonesia might have turned a corner in the war on terrorism” as the result of the Bali bombing of October 12, 2002. Hearteningly, the arrest of senior figures in Jemaah Islamiyah (which can be considered “the regional subsidiary of al Qaeda”) was supported by domestic mainstream religious groups. In light of these developments, Rabasa implies that U.S. relations with Southeast Asia are deepening, and likely to improve—although he acknowledges that the war against terrorism has polarized Southeast Asian societies to some extent and has been exploited opportunistically by certain leaders to thwart their opposition.

Rabasa argues that while anti-Americanism is a problem, it is not as alarming as many fear. He points out that, according to a survey of Indonesian demonstrations against the U.S. war in Iraq, participation dropped sharply during the war’s second week. Two weeks after U.S. forces swept into Baghdad, a Jakarta-based risk analysis firm was reporting that the war’s effects had all but disappeared. Rabasa also notes that Southeast Asian extremists are not necessarily linked to global networks. Some have domestic aims that are no direct threat to the United States.

Rabasa emphasizes that Islamic militancy in Indonesia is not as great as sometimes assumed. For example, self-defined Islamist parties (those supporting an Islamic state) received less than 6 percent of the vote in the 1999 parliamentary election. Within this minority, an even smaller fraction advocates violence or terrorism. All this is not to warrant complacency. The danger is that extremists can wield greater influence than their small numbers would seem to suggest, because governments and civil society institutions are weak.

**Sheldon W. Simon**, professor of political science at Arizona State University, discusses Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, paying particular attention to military links and intelligence sharing. He agrees with Rabasa that the sharing of meaningful information through ASEAN is improving, though there are short-term stumbling blocks. He points out that the expansion of Cobra Gold, an annual U.S.-led multilateral exercise, may facilitate cooperation and interoperability as well as to demonstrate American commitment to the region. Though there are problems with Cobra Gold (e.g., its anti-terrorism exercise is jungle-based instead of

## THE ASIA PROGRAM

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urban), the U.S. Pacific command would like to see up to five countries participating. Although only Singapore and Thailand have taken part so far, at least 18 governments will send observers in 2003.

Simon suggests that the United States could help Singapore by giving more anti-piracy training, X-ray technology and signals intelligence. Singapore is at the forefront of counter-terrorism and maritime security; a terrorist incident in the Straits of Malacca could disrupt traffic simply by driving up insurance rates. In contrast to Singapore, Thailand is somewhat in “denial” about the possibility of terrorist activity, Simon maintains. (His description of Thailand playing down the terrorist threat is similar to Wright-Neville and Rabasa’s portrayal of pre-Bali Indonesia.) According to Simon, Thai President Thaksin’s chief concern is to keep foreign investment flowing and keep up an image of a strong Thai government.

In contrast to behind-the-scenes operations in most Southeast Asian countries, U.S. military assistance to the Philippines is publicly conspicuous. But, as elsewhere in the war on terrorism, it is difficult for the United States to set clear and definite goals. According to Simon, the Mindanao conflict is especially problematic because Filipinos and others will perceive Washington as taking sides in a sensitive domestic controversy. “When training forces to cope with internal dissidence, becoming involved in the country’s domestic security problems is inevitable,” he writes.

**Larry A. Nicksch** of the U.S. Congressional Research Service agrees that the United States does not recognize the political sensitivity of aiding the Philippine military, especially against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). According to Nicksch, some elements of the Pentagon advocate a more direct (including combat) role for U.S. troops, apparently unaware of the strong negative reaction that such a move would provoke among the Philippine population. Nicksch emphasizes the importance of non-military activities such as law enforcement assistance, democratization support, and aid programs that target the fundamental causes of conflicts and decrease extremism’s appeal to young males. For example, the United States could offer more help to the Philippine National Police in its investigations. Such low-profile policies are unlikely to engender anti-U.S. reactions.

Nicksch advises Washington to be careful in dealing with the Philippine and Indonesian militaries—

they have their own agendas, which may not necessarily further U.S. interests. For example, the Philippine Armed Forces have become increasingly assertive in arguing for offensive action against the MILF and questioning Manila’s policy of trying to maintain a cease-fire. In Indonesia, elements of the military hope to maintain dominance in the outer provinces, and have attempted to weaken civilian government by nurturing militant Islamic groups such as Laskar Jihad and the Islamic Defenders Front. Nicksch argues that the United States should be cautious and resist the “easiest course” of unconditionally supporting Southeast Asian governments in their suppression of separatist movements—such a course would tie the United States to the political, economic and human rights abuses committed by these governments and their militaries. Certainly there are no easy answers. While a group like Jemaah

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*All of the essays in this Report indicate the tension between doing whatever it takes to catch terrorists, and tending assiduously to democracy-building, human-rights promotion, and public diplomacy.*

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Islamiyah is an obvious target for U.S. policy, assigning the label of “terrorist” to other organizations can be difficult and complex, as Nicksch points out.

**Carolina G. Hernandez**, professor of political science at the University of the Philippines and president of the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies in Manila, devotes her essay to the Philippine conflict, emphasizing the links between Philippine extremists and global terrorist networks. She describes how al Qaeda has been actively seeking to co-opt Southeast Asia’s militant groups by running training camps in Mindanao and using the Philippines as a sanctuary and springboard for third-country operations. She also explores the evidence of links between Iraq and Abu Sayyaf. According to Hernandez, the Philippines is the “obvious base” for any U.S.-led regional counter-terrorism campaign.

However, Hernandez maintains that the United States would be wise to work on its image in the Philippines. Resentment against U.S. troops is particularly vehement in Muslim areas, where



American colonization is bitterly recalled. Besides Muslims, anti-U.S. protesters also include former Vice President and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teofisto Guingona, Jr., certain faculty and students, laborers, farmers, left-wing politicians, and church-affiliated leaders. Although more than 80 percent of Filipinos approve of the presence of U.S. troops, Hernandez warns that Washington could gradually lose support if it continues to behave in ways that are perceived as “unfair and arrogant.” Moreover, the alleged links between Abu Sayyaf and the Iraq embassy were “lost on most people.”

In the murky world of terror and counter-terror, the threat is never clear or similarly perceived by everyone, and success is difficult to measure. Ultimately, the larger battle involves winning the hearts of Southeast Asian Muslims so that terrorists can neither recruit new members nor find hospitable environments. All of the essays in this Report indicate the tension between doing whatever it takes to catch terrorists, and tending assiduously to democracy-building, human-rights promotion, and public diplomacy. If working through multilateral

forums does not get much accomplished in a nuts-and-bolts fashion, it does promote cooperation and improve the United States’ image. Conversely, hesitating to move decisively against potential terrorists for fear of a public backlash can have tragic consequences.

Thus, every decision in the campaign against terrorism involves difficult trade-offs. In assembling this Special Report, the Asia Program hopes to assist those who are navigating the complexity of counter-terrorism, by exploring the opportunities and potential obstacles that lie ahead for both the United States and its Southeast Asian partners.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Statement of Matthew P. Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Hearing on “U.S. Policy Toward Southeast Asia,” House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asia & the Pacific, March 26, 2003.



## Prospects Dim: Counter-Terrorism Cooperation in Southeast Asia

DAVID WRIGHT-NEVILLE

In February 2003, the U.S. government rereleased its *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*. The austere 30-page document summarizes the war on terror in terms of a simple military dictum: “to isolate and localize its activities and then destroy it through intensive, sustained action.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I would like to address the immediate difficulties that the United States is likely to confront in implementing such a strategy in Southeast Asia, where the political and social environments do not always lend themselves to the bureaucratic-rational thinking that informs Washington’s stated approach. In other words, to what extent can Washington rely on partner governments to uphold their end of the war against terror?

From an outside perspective, Washington appears to be enjoying unexpected bilateral cooperation from Southeast Asian states. However, it is stating the obvious to point out that in no country in Southeast Asia, except perhaps Singapore, is bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation trouble free.

There are three areas that loom as particular problems for the United States: 1) structural weaknesses in the domestic political systems of Southeast Asian states, 2) a tendency of domestic and regional leaders to play the “politics of perception”—that is, to tap into anti-Western sentiment, boosting their own popularity but hindering cooperation with the United States, and 3) institutional weaknesses at the multilateral level, especially in the the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which appears to be becoming increasingly dysfunctional and irrelevant in terms of strategic cooperation.

Although I analyze these three dynamics as separate phenomena, they do not occur in isolation. In reality, they feed off one another in a symbiotic relationship sufficiently intense to potentially derail any U.S. counter-terrorism strategy that is premised on bilateral and multilateral cooperation within existing political frameworks. What is needed is a complex strategy that, by definition, will elude short-term success.



### STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONAL POLITIES

The first problem is entrenched corruption, particularly in areas such as customs, immigration, policing, transportation (road, land and sea), banking and finance. In each of these areas, corruption offers unique opportunities for any terrorist group to circumvent the superficially strict regulations imposed by many Southeast Asian countries in the wake of September 11. Corrupt officials provide terrorists with relatively easy access to key operational services, including arms smuggling, document forgery, illegal trafficking, and money laundering. Until checked by a more determined political agenda that begins with security-sensitive areas of the bureaucracy, private and public sector corruption will undermine counter-terrorist successes.

A second structural problem concerns doubts about the reliability of Southeast Asian intelligence and security services. Only Singapore’s intelligence services possess all the crucial qualities of high training, competence, professionalism and trustworthiness. Even in the case of Singapore, political influences from the ruling People’s Action Party are prone to color analyses that might be shared

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through bilateral cooperation with foreign counterparts.

The problem is rooted in a long history of political interference that has seen resources targeted mainly at groups and individuals openly critical of incumbent political authorities, rather than extremists at the fringe of mainstream politics who are considered to be no threat to regime stability. Thus Southeast Asian intelligence and security services have gained few insights into extremists' motivations and connections, and have given terrorist networks at least a decade head start to entrench themselves and put in place sophisticated counter-intelligence capabilities.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and last October's bombings in Bali, Southeast Asian intelligence and security services have demonstrated greater commitment to fighting terrorism. But much more needs to be done if this burst of enthusiasm is to be maintained through the long struggle to implement effective counter-terrorist operations. Most important, counter-terrorism must be depoliticized—which is unlikely in the short term, especially with 2004 and 2005 looming as busy years in the regional electoral cycle. Especially problematic will be presidential elections in Indonesia and the Philippines scheduled for mid-2004, and the possibility of early polls in Malaysia and Thailand late that year or in early 2005.

Indonesia serves as an example of the problems that lie ahead in this area. In the almost half a century since independence, Indonesia's intelligence and security services have been heavily involved in the culture of public and private sector corruption. More recently, a depressed economy has meant fewer opportunities for illicit profiteering, leading to sometimes debilitating inter-service and sometimes intra-service rivalries within the intelligence community.

By conflating regime preservation with national security, Indonesian intelligence agencies have actually ended up undermining national and regional stability.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, historical connections between sections of the Indonesian military and militant Islamist groups stand out as a particular concern. Allegations that senior regional commanders were involved in last August's ambush killings of two U.S. nationals and an Indonesian employed by the Freeport mine in West Papua is evidence of how the center lacks control over disparate elements of the military.

Another complicating factor in Indonesia is the wider political environment wherein even the use of intelligence and security agencies for legitimate purposes can generate public suspicion and hostility. A prime example is Jakarta's tardiness in moving against the suspected spiritual head of the Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. The failure to move against Ba'asyir and other groups such as the now disbanded Laskar Jihad, reflects President Megawati's reluctance to be seen repeating Suharto's sins by unfairly targeting opponents of the government.

### THE POLITICS OF ANTI-U.S. AND ANTI-WESTERN RHETORIC

The second factor obstructing counter-terrorism operations in Southeast Asia is what might be called "the politics of scapegoating," which involves politicians' deflecting public criticism onto a "foreign bogey." This practice is not peculiar to Southeast Asia. But in light of the region's history and the fragility of some of ASEAN's diplomatic relationships, it is particularly relevant.

For instance, the continual allegations and insults between Malaysia and Singapore (particularly from the former) over a whole range of unresolved issues have fed a culture of distrust and hostility that impedes any attempt to build on the countries' economic and environmental interdependence. As a result, cooperation in other fields, including counter-terrorism, is politically risky and often derailed.

Frequently, the West or the United States serves as an alternative target of criticism. Ordinary civilians have acquired an ambivalent, and sometimes hostile, view of the United States as the result of such allegations by political elites. This sentiment is especially strong in Indonesia, Malaysia and some parts of the Philippines and Thailand, but it lurks beneath the surface in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, as well. Only with Singapore does the United States enjoy a close, long-standing security relationship that makes cooperation on counter-terrorism unproblematic.

In Southeast Asia, contempt for the United States is not as deeply rooted as in other parts of the Islamic world. Until recently, Osama bin Laden figured as no more than a metaphor for resistance, a piece of pop-cultural capital that Fouad Ajami cleverly terms a "Ché Guevara of the Islamic world, bucking the mighty and getting away with it."<sup>4</sup>



Southeast Asians have often criticized U.S. cultural and social values, and many Muslims are highly critical of Washington for supporting Israel and (in their view) bullying Muslim nations. Only recently, however, have they begun to exhibit the visceral hatred displayed in the Middle East. Indeed, Washington's principle accusers in Southeast Asia are no longer limited to secular authoritarians like Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, for whom anti-U.S. and anti-Western diatribes have become a leitmotif of his four-decade political career.

And herein lies an important clue as to the source of this anti-American sentiment. Although most Southeast Asian governments see counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States as in their immediate interest, they are typically unable or unwilling to jeopardize their domestic position by jettisoning established political habits of proven effectiveness, including the fanning of anti-U.S. or anti-Western sentiment.

It is dangerous to dismiss anti-U.S. diatribes as hot air expelled in the heat of domestic political debate. This is because leaders' statements have a profound impact on public attitudes, gradually helping to construct a false sense of reality among ordinary citizens. In other words, political rhetoric has political consequences, and as a result U.S. public diplomacy has generally failed to sell to Southeast Asian Muslims the message that the war on terror is not an attack on Islam. Indeed, Richard Bett's observation that "U.S. leaders can say that they are not waging a war against Islam until they are blue in the face, but this will not convince Muslims who already distrust the United States" appears especially prescient in the case of Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

As a case in point, Malaysian Islamist groups have expressed disappointment at what they see as Washington's turning a blind eye to the Mahathir government's use of its Internal Security Act to intimidate opposition figures involved in legitimate political activities. This sense of betrayal—misplaced though it may be—reflects public attitudes that can be aroused easily to an anti-U.S. agenda.

Why does United States figure so prominently in Southeast Asian political discourses? One reason is globalization, which allows easy access to political and religious currents in the Middle East that help redefine Southeast Asian Islamic identities. In addition, Southeast Asian Muslims are aware as never before of events in Palestine, Iraq, and other places—

and the plight of fellow Muslims feeds criticism of the United States.

There is also another reason. In the 1980s several prominent regional leaders responded to the growing awareness of Middle Eastern religious influences by trying to boost their own Islamic and anti-Western credentials. By the mid-1990s, the injection of state-sponsored Islamist rhetoric had generated a religious dialectic over which these same authorities have now lost control. Leaders had originally intended this rhetoric to buttress their legitimacy by dressing them in a more pious veneer, but as opinion has turned gradually against the secular state they have become trapped in a discourse they cannot break without marginalizing a growing proportion of their constituency. This cycle, known in Malaysian Islamic circles as "*kafir-mengafir*," the mutual excoriation of infidels by the government and its Islamist opposition, renders counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States a highly contentious issue and leaves political leaders open to charges of hypocrisy. As Mark Juergensmeyer has recently observed, "for religious nationalists from Algeria to Indonesia ... America is the enemy."<sup>6</sup>

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***Leaders had originally intended Islamist rhetoric to buttress their legitimacy, but they have become trapped in a discourse they cannot break without marginalizing a growing portion of their constituency.***

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The deliberate demonization of the United States by political elites now risks undermining U.S. public diplomacy at a critical stage in the war on terror. Or to put it another way, as fast as the United States tries to convince ordinary Muslims that the war on terror is not an anti-Muslim campaign, certain political elites in the region are likely to adopt self-interested strategies that suggest otherwise.

#### **STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES AT THE MULTILATERAL REGIONAL LEVEL**

To the extent that the U.S. *National Counter-Terrorism Strategy* acknowledges the increasingly global character of contemporary terrorist net-

works, Washington has matched bilateral counter-terrorism initiatives with other measures designed to foster multilateral cooperation. On a superficial level, the benefits of multilateral cooperation are self-evident. But Southeast Asia's pre-eminent multilateral forum, ASEAN, is hopelessly equipped to deal with the challenge of counter-terrorism cooperation.

Although issues such as overlapping maritime claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines' claim to Sabah, and the treatment of respective Muslim and Chinese minorities no longer threaten ASEAN's existence, they do sustain subterranean intra-regional suspicions that militate against more open and productive exchanges on intelligence and security matters. For instance, ASEAN's failure to address and resolve these historically embedded rivalries discourages Singapore from sharing with its neighbors any material that might give clues to the extent of its human and signals intelligence capabilities in the region. To share such information would risk fanning anti-Singaporean sentiment in Indonesia and Malaysia (particularly the latter), and provoking counter-intelligence responses in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur that could hinder Singapore from monitoring militant Islamic groups and other phenomena that it considers threats to its national security.

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Outwardly, ASEAN as an organization responded swiftly and responsibly to the September 11 attacks on the United States. At their annual meeting, held in Brunei in early November 2001, ASEAN leaders issued a Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism. ASEAN committed itself to:

... counter, prevent and suppress all forms of terrorist acts in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and other international law,

especially taking into account the importance of all United Nations resolutions.

And declared that:

... in observing the above, all cooperative efforts to combat terrorism at the regional level shall consider joint practical counter-terrorism measures in line with specific circumstances in the region and in each country.

But as with all of ASEAN's grand initiatives, the devil is in the detail. In this case the problem lies in the caveat attached to the last paragraph, "in line with specific circumstances in the region and in each country." Through much of 2002, Indonesia used this qualification to rebuff requests from Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines for the arrest and extradition of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir on charges related to the activities of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network. Jakarta refused to budge despite evidence obtained during the interrogation of JI detainees indicating that Ba'asyir was a key player in the plot to attack targets in Singapore, including the U.S. embassy. Importantly, Jakarta never refuted the claims against Ba'asyir, but argued instead that because he had not committed a crime in Indonesia there was no basis upon which the authorities could arrest and extradite him. However, such an excuse rang hollow, since Indonesian authorities had arrested al Qaeda operative Omar al-Faruq and handed him over secretly to the United States for interrogation in mid-2002.

The problem lies in the persistence in the region of a narrowly defined conception of short-term national interest that is largely impervious to notions of longer-term strategic and security interdependence. Hence, although all ASEAN members share a common view that multilateral cooperation in certain areas is a good thing, their intellectual and philosophical embrace of the idea is compromised by political and historical realities.

Exchanges of intelligence and security information and personnel have been enhanced. However, undertaken mainly at the bilateral and trilateral levels, these relationships are structurally immature in that they are highly vulnerable to politicization from above, and in some instances to the whims of individual personalities within respective regional intelligence organizations.





Counter-terrorism cooperation between and among ASEAN members is usually confined to specific operational issues—the targeting of one group such as Jemaah Islamiyah, for example. Such operations allow other groups to slip through the regional net, and are a poor substitute for proactive counter-terrorism measures and thematic exchanges that involve the swapping of raw data and intelligence assessments on a wide range of developing threats. Thematic intelligence cooperation, sometimes involving joint scenario planning and war-gaming between intelligence analysts and security experts, characterizes counter-terrorism exchanges between the United States and its major Western allies and, ironically, between Western agencies and some of their individual Southeast Asian counterparts. The relative absence of similar exchanges under the aegis of ASEAN underscores its strategic immaturity and is a critical weak point in the regional counter-terrorism framework.

## CONCLUSION

The war against terrorism by the United States and its allies will be long and increasingly complex. To solve the problems inherent in Southeast Asian intelligence and security services will require nothing short of a sustained campaign to root out and deal effectively with the causes and consequences of public and private sector corruption. And there appears little political will to exorcise political interference and inter- and intra-service rivalries from Southeast Asian intelligence serves.

In the interim, an over-reliance on bilateral cooperation with Southeast Asian governments is unlikely to yield positive long-term benefits. In pursuing the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* in Southeast Asia, the United States must match bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation with an expansion of alternative intelligence collection efforts, both on its own and with reliable partners, especially UKUSA assets in the region, but also with Singapore. A similar strategy should be pursued at the operational level.

Secondly, Washington can do little to reverse the habit across political spectrums in Southeast Asia to demonize the United States. Rightly or wrongly, the United States is already seen by many in Southeast Asia as overbearing; American attempts to rebut

nonsensical claims will only end up feeding this perception—especially since Southeast Asian media tend to characterize such rebuttals as interference in domestic politics.

Yet this problem should not be ignored. Regardless of who pushes the anti-U.S. line, and whether or not they are privately friendly to the United States, the effect is the same: an environment more conducive to anti-U.S. hysteria.

Anti-American animus across Southeast Asia is not yet so entrenched as to render U.S. public diplomacy ineffective. In particular, individual Islamist scholars and organizations remain open to dialogue with both U.S. and other Western officials. But a recurring fear is that such dialogue will ultimately founder on Western reluctance to jeopardize relations with incumbent regimes—a diplomatic reality that provokes feelings from resignation to anger.

Tackling this phenomenon is notoriously difficult, especially for a powerful and influential country such as the United States, which often inspires unrealistic expectations by disaffected minorities around the world. Ultimately, the answer might rest in something as simple as making more overt statements in support of opposition groups unfairly treated by incumbent Southeast Asian regimes. To do so risks the ire of some of these regimes. But the stakes—successfully dealing with the terrorist challenge—are high. To cooperate with the United States to combat the terrorist threat is in the interests of every Southeast Asian regime, a fact that is acknowledged publicly, if not privately. Thus Washington should not underestimate its ability to ride out momentary piques of anger by small pockets of the Southeast Asian political elite.

Finally, nor is there much joy to be gained through multilateral routes. As currently structured, ASEAN is ill-equipped to take on a regional counter-terrorism role. Bringing ASEAN leaders together to issue grandiose statements of intent will fall far short of what Washington and even many Southeast Asian governments expect. A key problem will remain the culture of defensiveness that is deeply embedded in most of the newer ASEAN members, but also in Malaysia and Indonesia. Barring regime change, none of these member states is likely to suddenly embrace the outside world as a place of opportunity rather than a source of potential danger. (Even if Mahathir is true to his word and stands

down as prime minister in late 2003, he is still likely to exercise considerable influence over Malaysian foreign policy from behind the scenes.) Once again, there is little that Washington can do to change things in the short term. Unfortunately, given the highly mobile character of terrorist networks in Southeast Asia, bilateral and occasionally trilateral agreements are a poor substitute for a comprehensive regional counter-terrorism network.

A better option would be to use diplomacy to reward individual Southeast Asian states for multilateral cooperation and to play on the one-upmanship and rivalries that lurk beneath ASEAN's surface bonhomie. Encouraging cooperation will broaden the notion of "national interest" for key ASEAN members. This tactic might prove especially successful in such areas as combating money laundering, weapons smuggling, and other downstream illegal industries without which international and global terrorist networks cannot easily survive.

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*Note:* This article is an edited version of a chapter that will appear in Marika Vicziany, Pete Lentini and David Wright-Neville, eds., *Regional Security in the Asia Pacific: 9/11 and After* (London: Edward Elgar, forthcoming in 2003).

## ENDNOTES

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2. For example, see International Crisis Group, "Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The Case of the 'Ngruki Network' in Indonesia," Indonesia Briefing, August 8, 2002, Brussels and Jakarta.
3. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 3, 2002, 20.
4. Fouad Ajami, "The Sentry's Solitude," *Foreign Affairs*, 80, no. 6 (November/December, 2001), 4.
5. R.K. Betts, "The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror," *Political Science Quarterly*, 117, no. 1 (spring 2002), 26.
6. M. Juergensmeyer, "Religious Terror and Global War," in *Understanding September 11*, eds. C. Calhoun, P. Price and A. Timmer (New York: The New Press 2002), 39.



## Southeast Asia: The Second Front?

ANGEL M. RABASA

The concept of Southeast Asia as the second front in the war on terrorism was postulated about the time that the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. This was when terrorist cells were broken up in Malaysia and Singapore, and the United States dispatched several hundred military trainers to the Philippines—the largest operational deployment of U.S. forces outside of the Afghanistan theater of operations.

The idea of the “second front” is conceptually appealing because Southeast Asia has characteristics that make it a hospitable environment for terrorist groups. There are two major archipelagic countries, Indonesia and the Philippines, both with substantial insurgencies and serious problems of law and order.

Indonesia alone has more than 14,000 islands with porous borders, weak and dysfunctional governmental and law enforcement institutions, economic distress, rampant lawlessness and communal strife, and a political climate that inhibits government repression of extremists. There are well-established arms smuggling routes from Cambodia and Thailand through the Malay peninsula to Indonesia, and through eastern Malaysia to the southern Philippines. In all countries with Muslim populations, there are radical Islamic political factions that provide the base of support for international terrorist groups.

Inevitably the concept of a “second front” has come under criticism, on the grounds that the terrorist threat in the region is perhaps not as great as the idea implies, and that fronts are not appropriate concepts in the discussion of terrorism. I would argue that the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia is serious enough to justify a U.S. government focus on it, and that considering Southeast Asia a front in this struggle is appropriate. Not a front in the classical sense of military formations confronting the enemy across a defined geographic expanse, but a front as a region where countries with similar



geopolitical characteristics confront a terrorist threat with regional and international ramifications. If calling it the “second front” helps to focus the attention of U.S. policy-makers, the bureaucracy, and the Congress, then the concept has policy utility.

It is important to distinguish between two related but distinct sets of threats: international terrorism as the threat against which the current global war on terrorism is directed; and the threat of destabilization of moderate regional governments by Islamic extremists.

There is a tendency sometimes to lump Islamic terrorists and domestic extremists together, but analytically we can identify at least three classes of Islamic radicals, with distinct agendas, strategies, and tactics.

One consists of the international terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda and the Jemaah Islamiyah. They tend to have a very ambitious global or regional agenda, usually the establishment of a pan-Islamic political entity and the expulsion of the Western presence. They operate across international boundaries, and prefer to attack U.S. and other international targets.

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A second category consists of domestic extremists, such as the Laskar Jihad in Indonesia. They share the same militant Islamic fundamentalist ideology, but they differ in that their goals are more limited. They accept and, in the case of the Laskar Jihad, support the unity and integrity of the national state. Their operations and targets are usually local; for instance, in the case of the Laskar Jihad, Indonesian Christians in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi. Some of these armed groups came into being and operated with the collusion and support of military circles and personalities associated with the former Suharto regime, who had an interest in destabilizing the process of democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

The third category comprises the separatist groups active in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. These movements reflect the minority position of Muslim communities within non-Muslim majority states. In both cases, the conflicts go back a long way and derive essentially from indigenous causes such as, in the case of Moro separatism in the Philippines, demographic changes that altered the population balance in the south from a Muslim majority at the end of the nineteenth century to a less than one-fifth of the population today. In the case of southern Thailand, separatist sentiment reflected resistance to assimilation by the ethnic Malay majority in four of the country's southern provinces. Although arising from domestic factors, at least since the 1970s these conflicts acquired an international dimension.

We should note that Islamist groups, including those that are non-violent, represent a small minority of Southeast Asian Muslims. In the last parliamentary election in Indonesia in June 1999, the self-defined Islamic parties—the PBB (Partai Bulan Bintang), PK (Partai Keadilan) and others that advocated the establishment of an Islamic state—received less than 6 percent of the vote. Within this minority, only an even smaller minority advocates violence or supports terrorism.

Nevertheless, although a small minority, extremists have the potential to wield significant political influence because of the weakness of governments and civil society institutions. In Indonesia, radical groups took advantage of the free wheeling significant political environment after the fall of Suharto to launch what Southeast Asia political analyst Michael Davis called the “jihad project,” that is, the

attempt to gain political power through taking advantage of weakening state authority and opportunistic alliances with personalities associated with the Suharto regime and so-called “green” generals of the Suharto period. Although the ostensible mission of the Laskar Jihad was to defend the Muslims in the Moluccas and Sulawesi, its broader goal was to mobilize Muslim public opinion on the main islands on behalf of its political project.

Having laid out the landscape in general terms, we can turn to the political dynamics and developments in Southeast Asia as catalyzed by three critical events: September 11, the Bali bombing of October 12, 2002, and the war in Iraq.

September 11 and its aftermath fundamentally changed the complexion of U.S. relations with Southeast Asia, as well as the political dynamics within some Southeast Asian countries. The first important change brought about by September 11 was in threat perceptions. Terrorist groups were active in Southeast Asia before September 11, but their activities were generally considered unconnected and limited in scope. After September 11 and the discovery of terrorist cells throughout the region, the operations of these groups are seen as very extensive and linked in numerous ways to widespread regional and international networks.

We have learned a lot about the terrorist network in Southeast Asia in the last year. The regional Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) organization came to light with the arrests in May and June 2001 of members of an associated group, the KMM (Kumpulan Militan Malaysia or Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia). Also in Malaysia, JI members were arrested in December 2001, and in Singapore in December 2001 and May 2002. The links between the JI cells in Malaysia and Singapore are well documented and are described in the forthcoming publications by Zachary Abuza, *Terrorism and Radical Islam in Southeast Asia* (2003) and by this author in *Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists* (IISS Adelphi Paper 358), among others. A White Paper released by the government of Singapore in January 2003 documents in great detail the structure, recruitment, training, and planned operations of two cells that were broken up in Singapore and their linkages to al Qaeda.

More controversial is the question of the relationship between the KMM and the Malaysian



Islamic party, PAS. Although the KMM was reportedly headed by Nik Adli Nik Aziz (the son of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the PAS' spiritual leader and chief minister of Kelantan state), and a number of the arrested KMM suspects were also PAS members, no evidence has been proffered of a structural relationship between the two organizations.

Jemaah Islamiyah can be considered the regional subsidiary of al Qaeda. It has branches in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, and possibly in Australia and Papua. The key figures in this regional network are two Indonesian clerics, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali. Ba'asyir is the intellectual and spiritual leader of the network, while Hambali, an al Qaeda operative who had fought in Afghanistan, is the operational chief. Ba'asyir was arrested by the Indonesian authorities on grounds of involvement in terrorist attacks against churches in Indonesia in December 2000. In April 2003, he went on trial for treason. Hambali, who is probably the most wanted man in Southeast Asia, has gone to ground and remains at large. His whereabouts are unknown.

September 11 also changed policy priorities. Issues that loomed large in the U.S. bilateral relationship with Indonesia and Malaysia in the past have been overshadowed by more pressing concerns about terrorism. One indicator is the high level of U.S. military assistance to the Philippines and the involvement of U.S. personnel in counter-insurgency training that would have been inconceivable only two years ago. The Philippines has received substantial amounts of U.S. excess military equipment and has become the world's third largest recipient of U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding. Another important development is the lifting of restrictions on IMET funding for Indonesia that had been in effect, in one way or another, since 1993.

A third effect of September 11 was in the domestic political landscapes and policies of some Southeast Asian countries. Some governments, like those of Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, seized on the war on terrorism as an opportunity to forge closer cooperation with the United States and, in the case of Malaysia, to discredit the opposition Islamic party, by suggesting an association between the PAS and the KMM. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the war

on terrorism sharpened the political divide between the government of President Megawati and some Muslim political sectors and was perceived by the government as more of a danger than an opportunity.

A fourth effect was the revitalization of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a vehicle for intensified counter-terrorism cooperation. With the increased understanding of the regional nature of the threat came increased cooperation and information exchanges among the interior ministries and intelligence services of ASEAN countries.

The Bali bombing of October 12, 2002, was the worst terrorist incident in Indonesian history. It left 180 dead and over 300 injured and devastated Bali's economy, Indonesia's major source of revenue from tourism. It also involved what might have been the first instance of a suicide bombing in Indonesian history.

Before Bali, the Indonesian government found it difficult to take meaningful action against extremists and suspected terrorists. Jakarta's hesitant approach to the problem of extremism and terrorism was a function of the Megawati government's political

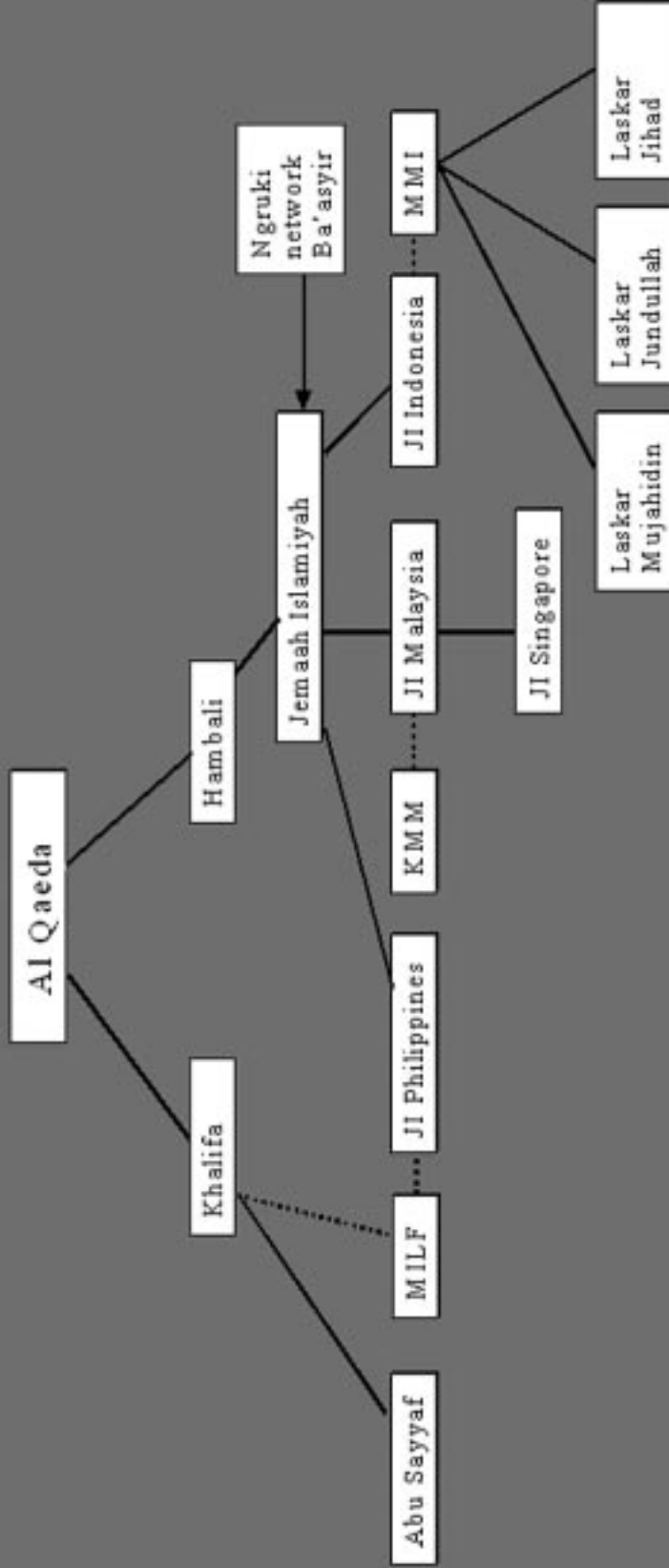
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*Although a small minority, extremists have the potential to wield significant political influence because of the weakness of governments and civil institutions.*

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weakness. Nevertheless, even before the Bali bombing, the Indonesian government, under some degree of international pressure, was showing signs of greater resolve to combat terrorism and extremism. In May 2002 the Laskar Jihad leader Umar Ja'afar Thalib was placed under house arrest and charged with inciting religious violence. In June 2002, the Indonesian authorities picked up and transferred to U.S. custody Omar al-Faruq, identified as the most senior al Qaeda operative in Southeast Asia. Al-Faruq's confession led to the capture of Seyam Reda, a German national of Syrian descent who claimed to be a correspondent for al-Jazeera and is believed to have been the head of finances for al Qaeda in Southeast Asia.

# The Terrorist Network in Southeast Asia



Source: RAND Corporation



The response of the Indonesian government and public to the Bali bombing manifested a major change in attitude toward terrorism. With the support of the mainstream political and religious groups, the government put into effect emergency anti-terrorism decrees that empowered the authorities to arrest suspected terrorists based on intelligence information and to hold them for up to a week without charges, or longer if justified by the intelligence. The Laskar Jihad denied any connection to the bombing, but announced it had disbanded. As noted above, the government arrested Ba'asyir, the alleged head of the Jemaah Islamiyah, who lost the support of some influential Muslim political figures who previously had been sympathetic. And in what turned out to be a very impressive police investigation, the authorities found and arrested the individuals who had planned and implemented the attack. These included senior figures in the Jemaah Islamiyah organization. Thus, the response to the Bali bombing indicates that, at least from the standpoint of political will, Indonesia might have turned a corner in the war on terrorism.

What changes can be expected from the war in Iraq and what follows? At one level, the disappearance of the Saddam regime as a sponsor of terrorism reduces the risk of state-sponsored terrorism from that quarter. However, the critical issue in the Muslim regions of Southeast Asia is whether a moderate or a militant version of political Islam will pre-

vail. Therefore, the question is whether the invasion of Iraq will polarize mainstream Muslim against the United States and its friends and allies, as the radicals hope, or not.

One critical factor was the duration and conduct of the war. Some analysts, including this author, believed that if the war turned out to be short and without large-scale civilian casualties, there would be criticism by religious and political leaders, and the usual anti-American demonstrations, but no significant long-term damage to U.S.-Indonesia relations or to the process of democratic consolidation in Indonesia. A survey of anti-war demonstrations in Jakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, and South Sulawesi shows that the number and level of participation in the demonstrations dropped sharply about the second week in the war, when the defeat of the Saddam government seemed imminent. Two weeks after U.S. forces swept into Baghdad on April 9, a Jakarta-based risk analysis firm was reporting that the effects of the war in Iraq had all but disappeared.

The key factor now is how the United States and its coalition partners go about establishing a democratic foundation in Iraq and turning power over to the Iraqi people. If the United States can make a credible case that it is not engaged in colonialism, and that it is on the side of Muslim democrats, it would go a long way toward defusing suspicions and gaining the trust of moderate Muslims whose support is essential in the struggle against terrorism and extremism in Southeast Asia.

## U.S. Policy and Terrorism in Southeast Asia

SHELDON W. SIMON

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States initially targeted the perpetrators of the atrocities on the U.S. homeland and those who provided sanctuary—al Qaeda and the Taliban. Subsequently, however, the Bush administration broadened its anti-terrorist purview to encompass all groups engaged in terrorist actions against friendly governments, as long as those governments designated the groups “terrorist.” In the Philippines, such groups include the Abu Sayyaf—though not the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) which continues to negotiate with the Philippine government. In other parts of Southeast Asia, the United States includes the KMM (Malaysian Mujahideen Movement) in Malaysia and Singapore, and the Jemah Islamiyah, whose primary location appears to be Indonesia but whose operatives may span the region in hopes of creating an Islamic regime encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines, and southern Thailand.

This brief paper is drawn from a larger study by the author, which examines U.S. military cooperation with partner countries along the East Asian littoral. In Southeast Asia, those countries are Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines.

9/11 and its aftermath in Bali and Davao have demonstrated that highly motivated non-state actors with careful planning, organization, and financing can seriously challenge the security of nations and precipitate a major reconception of national defense and law enforcement priorities.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism and transnational crime are closely related. Proceeds from narcotics trafficking and money laundering are significant sources of terrorist finance. Therefore, law enforcement authorities must become major players alongside armed forces in the fight against transnational terror. The most important asset local authorities bring to the partnership is intelligence on terrorist groups and criminal activities within their own countries. Insofar as al Qaeda assists Islamist



movements in Southeast Asia such as Jemah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, the KMM, and various Laskar groups in Indonesia, the first line of defense depends on the effectiveness of national surveillance and apprehension.

The two Southeast Asian states where terrorist movements are strongest, Indonesia and the Philippines, are weak states unable to enforce basic law and order, with the political and economic marginalization of large portions of their populations despite the fact that both are functioning democracies. On the other hand, Islamist threats in Southeast Asia are not nearly as great as in the Arab world and South Asia:

First, there is no risk in the region of state-sponsored terrorism against U.S. interests. Second, the profound ethnic and religious diversity (including in the practice of Islam) . . . militates against the establishment of a fundamentalist hegemony by any one group. Third, all the major Southeast Asian states are more or less democratic. Dissent is generally tolerated, making radical Islam less attractive as a broader vehi-

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cle for opposition to the government. . . . Finally, the only terror groups in the region that have demonstrated a capacity for large-scale attacks—the JI and KMM—are made up of well educated middle classes...., and these organizations have not managed to build a constituency among the masses of the poor.<sup>2</sup>

Confronting transnational terror requires multi-lateral cooperation. Because members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have historically guarded their sovereignty and been particularly loath to permit interference in their domestic affairs, the terrorist challenge is especially sensitive. On the one hand, terrorism occurs within countries and is first and foremost a domestic security and law enforcement problem. However, because terrorists move among countries, obtain training and financing internationally, and may even be directed from elsewhere, counter-terror action must also involve other states. ASEAN has moved very cautiously into counter-terror cooperation. In May 2002, the ASEAN states agreed on an Action Plan that provided for enhanced cooperation in intelligence sharing and coordination of anti-terror laws. Singapore's proposal that each member form a special anti-terrorist team as a contact point was also accepted. In August 2002, ASEAN and the United States issued a "Joint Declaration . . . to Combat International Terrorism." It was followed by the establishment of an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Intersessional meeting on terrorism scheduled for 2003 and jointly sponsored by Malaysia and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In apparent recognition of Malaysia's anti-terrorist efforts, the Bush administration proposed that Malaysia head a Regional Training Center to Counter Terrorism. To be funded by the United States, Washington announced the Center offer at a meeting with ASEAN states during the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in late October 2002 in Los Cabos, Mexico. The Center would focus on projects enhancing Southeast Asian anti-terrorist capabilities, particularly with respect to intelligence.<sup>4</sup>

Parallel with the Anti-Terrorism Center is a new pact on sharing intelligence among Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Thailand, the first meeting of which occurred in Manila in

January 2003. Consisting of national security and law enforcement personnel, the group undertook a simulation exercise to assess its cooperative capabilities. The members agreed to form a permanent committee to provide "policy guidance" in the fight against terror as well as address more traditional anti-crime issues such as piracy, money laundering, and arms smuggling.<sup>5</sup>

While the recent anti-terrorism agreements in Southeast Asia are an important step toward regional collaboration, ASEAN states still have been slow to ratify 12 key anti-terrorist conventions, especially the treaty suppressing terrorist finances. Moreover, both nationalist elements in the Philippines and Muslim parties in Malaysia and Indonesia express distrust over U.S.-sponsored anti-terror activities as directed against Islam.<sup>6</sup> As long as the direction of anti-terror actions is exclusively against jihadists, Muslims in Southeast Asia will remain suspicious and uncomfortable unless mainstream Muslim leaders and organizations become more vocal in their condemnation of these groups.

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*Emphasizing a terrorist problem in Thailand's south would be bad for foreign investment. While the Thai military would welcome more support, to some extent the government is in denial about terrorist activity.*

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#### SINGAPORE

Singapore is enthusiastic about multilateral anti-terrorist cooperation, though even along this dimension the city-state seems more comfortable sharing intelligence with the United States than with its neighbors.<sup>7</sup> There could be more intelligence sharing from the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), particularly signals intelligence (SIGINT) acquired on regional terror groups. A quid pro quo in exchange for Southeast Asian human intelligence (HUMINT) is a possibility; the main obstacle for the United States, however, is the releasability of classified information. Indeed, Southeast Asian HUMINT could help U.S. SIGINT collectors establish targeting pri-

orities. Some of this already occurs through contacts between PACOM's Joint Intelligence Center and Singapore's Joint Counterterrorism Center. Singapore would like to see the contacts enhanced.<sup>8</sup>

Protecting the Strait of Malacca where 1100 supertankers pass eastbound annually is of great concern to Singapore. A terrorist incident could disrupt traffic simply by causing insurance rates to skyrocket. The Singapore Coast Guard might be interested in anti-piracy (and anti-terror) training from its American counterpart. Terrorist groups have engaged in piracy, according to the Malaysian Institute for Maritime Affairs. The MILF and Abu Sayyaf have attacked vessels in the Sulu Sea; and although some anti-piracy cooperation occurs among the littoral states, obstacles remain. For example, "hot pursuit" by one state in the territorial waters of another is inhibited by the need to obtain specific permission from the latter on a case-by-case basis. This is a particular problem when pirates flee into Indonesian waters among that country's thousands of islands.<sup>9</sup>

*Although U.S. training of Philippine forces is labeled counter-terror, in fact, the effort seems to be more counter-insurgency—and could lead to prolonged U.S. military presence.*

Nevertheless, Singapore is at the forefront of maritime security, having implemented a Strategic Goods Control law in January 2003, thus insuring that the city-state becomes the first major port to secure cargo in line with U.S. maritime cargo transportation requirements. Singapore desires additional U.S. X-ray technology, however, to meet the speed demands of one of the world's busiest ports.<sup>10</sup>

#### THAILAND

America's most extensive Southeast Asian multilateral exercise—Cobra Gold—has been held annually in Thailand for over 20 years. Its scenarios constitute a good reflection of the region's security concerns. Beginning in 2002, Singapore jointed Cobra Gold; and many other Asian states sent observers, includ-

ing China, Vietnam, Russia, and India. Regardless of its success as a training exercise, Cobra Gold provides two important political benefits: it demonstrates continued American commitment to the region; and it offers ASEAN militaries an opportunity to exercise with each other, though only Singapore and Thailand have currently taken advantage.

In 2002, Cobra Gold included peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, and drug interdiction components—all important for Thailand and the region. The anti-terrorism training emphasized the handling of chemical and biological weapons; the peacekeeping scenario involved dealing with large numbers of refugees crammed into crowded camps as well as supervising the withdrawal of invading troops—reminiscent of UN peacekeeping efforts in Cambodia and East Timor.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of the U.S. armed forces, interoperability training is the primary benefit, and PACOM would like to see up to five countries involved in future Cobra Gold exercises.

While counter-terror is now a regular feature of Thai-U.S. exercises, the Thai do not foresee anything comparable to the Philippine Balikatan exercises. The main reason is that emphasizing a terrorist problem in the south would be bad for foreign investment. Nevertheless, some Thai officers have traveled to Mindanao to observe Balikatan; and Thai-U.S. bilateral maritime exercises have included a scenario involving the liberation of a ship taken over by terrorists.<sup>12</sup> Cobra Gold's counter-terror event is jungle-based; as yet, there is no plan for an urban exercise, although most terrorist incidents occur in urban settings.

While the Thai military would welcome more U.S. anti-terror support, especially technical intelligence, Prime Minister Thaksin's government does not want a high U.S. profile in this realm. Greater U.S. involvement, comparable to that in the Philippines, would be seen in Thailand as a sign of the government's political weakness.<sup>13</sup> To some extent, the Thai government is in denial about terrorist activity. It has viewed southern violence as lawlessness rather than radical Islamic actions. Because Thailand is an open country with porous borders, Islamic militants have entered in transit or for refuge. In Thailand's southernmost provinces, 85 percent of the population is Muslim, though nation-



ally that number dwindles to just 10 percent. Plans to extend portions of the 2003 Cobra Gold to southern Thailand were made with the terrorist situation in mind.<sup>14</sup>

For maximum effect, though, counter-terror exercises should be multilateral because Southeast Asian jihadists operate transnationally. Initially, the United States might consider exercises that emphasize counter-terrorist training of the region's Special Forces based on America's experience in Afghanistan. The United States might also consider providing intelligence to ASEAN's own counter-terror group.<sup>15</sup> Cobra Gold 2003 could become a venue for multilateral anti-terror cooperation. Eighteen states are sending observers; they presumably will witness the anti-terror component of the exercise in the south.

There are indications that Thailand is taking terrorism as a serious challenge. The new national security strategy (2003-2006) acknowledges the existence of terrorist groups in the country and calls for bilateral and multilateral intelligence cooperation as well as strengthening anti-terrorism legislation. Bangkok held its first urban anti-terror exercise in December 2002, though city governor Samak Sundaravej labeled it a failure with poor organization and communication breakdowns.<sup>16</sup>

Anti-terrorist ties to the United States are strengthening with the creation of a new bilateral military exercise, Known Warrior. Reflecting the U.S. concern that Thailand may be a channel for regional terrorists, the exercise will touch on intelligence coordination and special operations. Whether the new exercise will involve Thailand's combined army and police counter-terrorism task force is unclear. Additional training for the task force is needed because its initial mandate was limited to rescuing hostages and defusing airline hijacks.<sup>17</sup> These developments suggest some Thai recognition that it has a terrorist problem and is willing to confront it both regionally and with U.S. assistance.

## THE PHILIPPINES

By 2002, the United States forged a five-year defense assistance plan for the Philippines and agreed to high level civilian talks through a new Defense Policy Board. The initial Balikatan-02 training exercise involved 1000 U.S. forces deployed

for six months in Mindanao to promote interoperability with the Philippines in order to enhance the latter's counter-terrorist abilities. Subsequent exercises held primarily in Luzon will train two light reaction companies, four light infantry battalions, and helicopter crews for night flying. The light reaction companies have become the envy of the armed forces with late model laser sight rifles, night vision goggles, bulletproof vests, helmets, and individual radios. Total U.S. military assistance for the Philippines through 2002 was \$70 million.<sup>18</sup>

While the Balikatan exercises in counter-insurgency are specifically tailored for the Philippines, Philippine armed forces officials indicated that observers from other ASEAN members would be welcome. However, the Philippine constitution requires that the presence of foreign forces on Philippine territory must be preceded by a treaty. Therefore, inviting observers from other states could be politically complicated.

The U.S. training program for 2003 in Luzon reflects the Pentagon's growing concern that radical Islamic movements in Southeast Asia are more closely linked than originally thought. Despite some successes against the Abu Sayyaf, the radical group has been tied to a recent series of bombings in the southern Philippines. In November 2002, an Abu Sayyaf member was arrested in Thailand trying to buy weapons; and there are some U.S. reports that the group has established relations with Jemaah Islamiya, the radical network bent on creating a caliphate for much of Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup>

Counter-terrorism in the Philippines is further complicated by the jurisdictional overlap between law enforcement agencies and the armed forces. While the former is exclusively tasked with investigating terrorist finances, both law enforcement and the military conduct counter-terror field operations, though not always cooperatively. Moreover, although U.S. training of Philippine forces in both Luzon and Mindanao is labeled counter-terror, in fact, the effort seems to be more counter-insurgency against the paramilitary forces of Abu Sayyaf and the MILF. These training exercises provide closer military links between the two states and could lead to a prolonged U.S. military presence. Current plans project U.S. training schedules beyond February 2004.<sup>20</sup>

In the eyes of Washington, the training and equipping of Philippine battalions to deal with

radical Islamic and militarized communist challenges are part of the global war on terror. However, the United States should be cognizant of certain political pitfalls in the Philippines. Targeting the Abu Sayyaf, a relatively small kidnap and murder gang confined mostly to Basilan, has generally been a success, especially when followed by U.S. civic action in poor villages in need of roads, wells, and medical attention. More recently, however, despite the Arroyo government's ongoing efforts to negotiate with the much larger, better equipped, and politically popular MILF, the Philippine army has been pursuing a different policy on the ground. A multi-battalion operation struck at the MILF's last major base camp in North Cotabato province in February 2003, overrunning the complex but at the same time displacing more than 40,000 civilians. Philippine military intelligence claimed the camp was a training ground for Indonesian and Malaysian militants. In the aftermath of the operation, however, the MILF retaliated with scattered attacks throughout Mindanao. Two particularly vicious bombings in March and April 2003 in Davao City with many casualties have escalated the conflict, though the MILF has denied culpability and stated that the Front does not target civilians.<sup>21</sup> PACOM should be cautious about becoming linked publicly with Philippine military actions against the MILF. This would amount to taking sides in a sensitive Philippine controversy over the best way to promote Mindanao's future. At the same time, PACOM should be aware that its training and equipment transfer to the Philippine armed forces will be employed against the MILF. In sum, when training forces to cope with internal dissidence, becoming involved in the country's domestic security problems is inevitable.

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## Southeast Asian Terrorism in U.S. Policy

LARRY A. NIKSCH

Since the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the United States has recognized gradually the complexity of formulating policies against al Qaeda and other radical Muslim groups in Southeast Asia. Simply defining “terrorism” is a constant challenge for the Bush administration, as governments and individual groups try to paint the terrorist label on their enemies.

To designate Jemaah Islamiyah officially as a terrorist group was easy. Evidence of links to al Qaeda is clear. The organization seeks the overthrow of regional governments and the creation of an Islamic state in Southeast Asia. It is anti-U.S. and anti-West, and its tactics are clandestine and conspiratorial, aimed at violence against U.S. targets and those of other perceived enemies. Its organization is regional.

Separatist insurgencies in the Philippines and Indonesia present a more complex definitional problem. Many of these insurgencies have long histories of seeking independence for particular regions within existing states. Most do not have specific anti-U.S. orientations, and several plead for U.S. support for their causes. However, a number of the insurgencies have a fundamentalist Islamic nature. For example, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines have links to al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. The Philippine and Indonesian governments have strong views on whether such groups should be designated as terrorist, and they seek to influence U.S. policy in defining terrorism.

A third category of groups includes fundamentalist Muslim organizations and political parties in Indonesia and Malaysia. They mix violent and non-violent tactics. Their actions usually do not target U.S. interests, but their rhetoric often is critical of U.S. policies. They generally oppose U.S. influences—political, economic, and cultural—in their countries. Their links to al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah are unclear, but they appear to be sympathetic.



### CONTRASTING GOVERNMENTAL AND MILITARY POLICIES

In Southeast Asia, the complexity facing the United States is heightened by different governmental policies toward terrorism and different views of the appropriate U.S. role. The Philippines, Singapore and, to a degree, Malaysia have welcomed cooperation with Washington in their relatively aggressive campaigns to combat terrorism. The Indonesian government’s position is less straightforward. Prior to the Bali bombing in October 2002, Jakarta denied that terrorist networks existed in Indonesia and refused to act against individuals identified by the Bush administration and other governments as terrorist leaders. After Bali, the country awoke to the danger and accepted U.S. and Australian assistance in investigating the bombing and apprehending instigators. Nevertheless, Muslim government officials and Muslim parties in the parliament remain suspicious of anti-terrorism policies and of cooperation with Washington.

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Within the Philippine and Indonesian governments, the roles of their militaries are a special problem. The Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) has espoused cooperation with the United States as a source of expertise and resources to bolster its ability to combat Abu Sayyaf. Indeed, U.S. military support clearly improved the AFP's operational capabilities on Basilan Island in 2002. Now the AFP argues for offensive action against the MILF, and questions Manila's policy of negotiating and trying to maintain a cease-fire with this group. The AFP became increasingly assertive as evidence surfaced repeatedly in 2002 that the MILF has direct links with Jemaah Islamiyah and has provided training facilities for Jemaah Islamiyah and possibly al Qaeda cadres. The AFP clearly seeks a broader U.S. support role to strengthen it against the MILF.

The agenda of the Indonesian military (TNI) is to assert political power vis-à-vis the civilian government that has come into being after the collapse of the Suharto regime in May 1998. The TNI especially wants to maintain its dominant position (political and economic) in the provinces and outer islands. It has exploited cynically separatist insurgencies and religious violence in the outer islands to weaken the civilian government and demonstrate the need for a strong TNI role. Thus, the TNI helped to create and nurture militant Islamic groups like Laskar Jihad and the Islamic Defenders Front, and supported Laskar Jihad's violence in the outer islands. Since September 11, 2001, the TNI has been quick to label separatist movements in Aceh and Papua as "terrorist." It pressures civilian officials for a free hand in dealing with these movements, including no constraint on its policies toward the civilian populations. The result is a steady stream of human rights abuses committed by the TNI in these and other parts of Indonesia.

### MEANING FOR U.S. POLICY

Jemaah Islamiyah is and should be a direct target of U.S. anti-terrorism policy in Southeast Asia. It remains a direct threat to Americans and U.S. interests in the region, and it plotted to kill Americans in Singapore in 2001 and Bali in 2002. In terms of strategy and tactics, the keys to defeating Jemaah Islamiyah are law enforcement and intelligence. The conspiratorial, clandestine nature of Jemaah

Islamiyah can be dealt with most effectively through criminal investigations. The Singaporean and Indonesian investigations of the Bali bombing demonstrated that good intelligence collection and police work produced positive results in apprehending Jemaah Islamiyah cadres and breaking up the organization. U.S. aid in these investigations (supplemented by Australian aid) furthered U.S. policy goals. In the Philippines, there is need for similar investigations of the recent bombings in Mindanao, given the uncertainty over which group carried out these acts. The type of U.S. law enforcement assistance provided to the Indonesian police could also benefit the Philippine National Police in its dealing with the Mindanao bombings. U.S. law enforcement and intelligence assistance is low-profile and thus less likely to engender anti-U.S. political reactions—an especially important advantage in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The issue of the U.S. profile is also relevant to the U.S. military role in the Philippines. Despite the success of the 2002 Basilan island campaign, elements of the Pentagon apparently asserted that the U.S. should have a more direct role (including a combat role) against Abu Sayyaf in the Sulu islands south of Basilan, especially on the island of Jolo. When Pentagon officials disclosed a plan at the end of

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***Pentagon officials did not recognize the political sensitivity of the U.S. military role in the Philippines. They also appear to be inadequately aware of the implications of a U.S. combat role if all-out war resumes.***

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February 2003 involving U.S. troops on the ground on Jolo and Marine ground and air units offshore, the Philippine reaction was strongly negative. Critics cited constitutional prescriptions against foreign combat forces and the controversial, still remembered history of U.S. combat operations in the Jolo region from 1906 to 1914. The plan was shelved. U.S.-Philippine negotiations resumed, likely aiming at a U.S. supportive role closer to that on Basilan in 2002. The lesson: Pentagon officials did not recognize the

political sensitivity of the U.S. military role in the Philippines. They also appear to be inadequately aware of the implications of a U.S. combat role if all-out war resumes with the MILF and the AFP calls for U.S. assistance in such a “wider war.”

U.S. support programs could be helpful in addressing weakness in the areas of maritime security and surveillance on the part of the Philippines and other countries. Abu Sayyaf is unlikely to be eliminated as long as it can move relatively freely over water in the Sulu-western Mindanao region. The maritime corridor between Mindanao and the Indonesian island of Suluwesi appears to be the biggest problem in maritime security, as it seems to be the key route for the transport of manpower and weapons by Jemaah Islamiyah. Some experts point to the traditional lack of maritime security in the Malacca Strait (a longtime haven for pirates) as offering al Qaeda an opportunity to strike against the large oil tankers and other ships that traverse this passage.

The interests of the United States lead it to oppose the fundamentalist and separatist agendas of Muslim groups, which are not necessarily anti-U.S. The easiest course for the United States would be unconditional support of Southeast Asian governments against these movements; but such a course would tie the United States to the political, economic, and human rights abuses committed by these governments and their militaries. This danger is especially acute in Indonesia, where the Bush administration faces strong congressional suspicion of U.S. ties to the TNI. This suspicion is intensified by the apparent complicity of the TNI’s Kopassus (special forces) in the murder and wounding of

American teachers in Papua in 2002. A more constructive U.S. approach would be to influence the political, religious, and economic factors behind these fundamentalist and separatist movements. Support for democratization, autonomy arrangements, and carefully planned economic aid programs would target the fundamental causes behind conflicts and decrease extremism’s appeal to young Muslim males. The Bush administration’s emphasis on “getting our message” to the Muslim populations of key countries argues for restoring U.S. information programs in Southeast Asian countries that were so active in the 1980s (I participated in a number of these) but were terminated in the 1990s.

Except for Jemaah Islamiyah, the MILF is the most important Muslim group addressed by U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, and may well present the Bush administration with a fundamental decision in the near future. The Bush administration has fluctuated in its attitude toward the MILF since the Basilan operation began in early 2002. The administration sought to avoid a U.S. military clash with the MILF, but reportedly considered designating it a terrorist organization in November 2002, as evidence mounted of links to Jemaah Islamiyah. Philippine President Arroyo’s intervention reportedly dissuaded the administration from this action. However, Arroyo’s own accommodationist policy toward the MILF now stands on the brink of collapse. The AFP is pressing to “wage war” against the MILF, and the Bush administration will have to confront the question of its role in such a wider war. The implications of even non-combat support throughout much of Mindanao would be profound in the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and for the global U.S. war against terrorism.





## Fighting Terrorism in Southeast Asia: A View from the Philippines

CAROLINA G. HERNANDEZ

**T**errorism is not a new security challenge, anymore than it is a monopoly of a single group of extremists. What is new are 1) the difficulty of managing terrorism, as a consequence of 20th-century technology that has benefited both the state and its opponents, 2) the “democratizing” impact of technology on terror, and 3) new motivations that go beyond political objectives, of radical groups on the fringes of a number of religions.<sup>1</sup>

Since the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, global consensus on the counter-terrorism campaign has diverged. Though supportive of U.S. leadership originally, many friends and allies—particularly in Europe—considered threats against the “axis of evil” and the war against Iraq to be too extreme. In Southeast Asia, there is no common regional response, but many wonder what Washington’s inclination to use military force might mean for them.

The Non-Aligned Movement, of which most Southeast Asian countries are members, met in Kuala Lumpur to urge a diplomatic solution to the Iraq problem within the framework of the United Nations. Meanwhile, anti-war protests—not limited to any particular political, ethnic or religions group—swept across Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in the world. Regardless of what their governments might say, and despite their own criticism of Saddam Hussein, the people of Southeast Asia seemed opposed to war.

However, the United States received official support from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Singapore. The alleged link between terrorism and the war in Iraq was lost on most of the public, but evidence for such a connection has grown. Philippine authorities have gathered intelligence indicating a link between the Iraqi embassy and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which is suspected of being part of the al Qaeda network. According to authorities, an embassy official’s mobile phone was in touch with the ASG, and used to detonate a



bomb in a city in the southern Philippines. Two embassy officials were monitored taking photographs of the U.S. military cemetery at Fort Bonifacio in metropolitan Manila, prior to a public event involving the U.S. Embassy in Manila. The Philippine government expelled these three Iraqi officials before and during the war on Iraq.

### SOUTHEAST ASIA AS A SECOND FRONT?

In the months following 9/11, it became increasingly apparent that international terrorism had spanned the globe and established a network in Southeast Asia. Intelligence reports indicated that cells organized by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a militant Islamic organization allegedly led by the Indonesian reclusive cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, exist in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The regional response to this information has been complex, however.

While the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore acknowledged the presence of these cells and took measures against them, Indonesia was slow to do so. Until the Bali bombing in October 2002, Jakarta

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was in a state of denial—mainly due to sensitivities of the overwhelming Muslim majority, a shaky economic situation, and the government’s concern for its own survival. As one intelligence report after another revealed the presence of a terrorist network, the notion of a “second front” in Southeast Asia was increasingly taken seriously.

Why Southeast Asia? A number of explanations might be useful.<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asia hosts the largest Muslim country in the world—Indonesia. Although its population is predominantly secular and modernist, demonstrations and rallies have proved the intensity of anti-American sentiment. Malaysia has a Muslim majority while the Philippines and Thailand have separatist Muslim minorities. Further deterioration of economic conditions would facilitate the recruitment of terrorists. Aceh in Indonesia and Mindanao in the Philippines are seen as “particular targets of concern in a counter-terrorism campaign.”<sup>3</sup> Although the Free Aceh Movement does not derive from Islamic fundamentalism and does not seek an exclusive, independent Islamic state, it is often misperceived as doing so.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) aims for an Islamic state in the Southern Philippines, and is not content with the establishment of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao. In addition, other militant Islamic groups in Southeast Asia have increased their influence, including the Laskar Jihad, the Islamic Defenders Front, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir’s Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), the Al-Maunah and Kumpulan Mujahidin/Militan Malaysia (KMM), and the JI. Certain extremists, arrested in the Philippines and Singapore, have made confessions that confirm in the minds of authorities the existence of a regional terrorist network, and the idea of Southeast Asia as the “second front.”

### THE TERRORISM NETWORK

At the steering committee meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), JI was recognized as “by far the most important terrorist organization in the region.”<sup>5</sup> Besides the Bali bombing that killed 200 people, JI is implicated in the December 2001 plot to blow up the U.S., Australian, British, and Israeli embassies; the Christmas Eve bombings in Jakarta and Batam in 2000; and the December 30, 2000, bombing in Manila.

In Malaysia, authorities have arrested 40 members of KMM, including numerous individuals suspected of links with al Qaeda. In the Philippines, a number of Indonesian nationals with suspected links to al Qaeda were arrested, tried, and convicted for terrorist activities in the Philippines and in Indonesia.

The extent of al Qaeda’s penetration into Southeast Asia, which became clear throughout 2002, was a surprise to many. Evidently, al Qaeda has been actively seeking to co-opt Southeast Asia’s militant Islamic groups into its network. It appeared that Hambali Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin, JI’s Chief of Operations, was also al Qaeda’s “regional director” for Southeast Asia—and one of its top six leaders after the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Hambali’s successor as chief of operations of JI, Ustaz Mukhlas Ali Ghuftron (Muklas), was implicated in the Bali bombing and had been caught together with other top conspirators by Indonesian authorities. JI’s spiritual leader, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, is in detention in connection with the Christmas 2000 bombings.

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*The alleged link between terrorism and the war in Iraq was lost on most of the public, but evidence for such a connection has grown.*

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In December 2001, authorities in Singapore arrested 15 people for terrorism-related activities, although two were released in January 2002. These two were prohibited to contact any terrorist organization, to prevent further involvement with the MILF. (They had allegedly visited the MILF training camp in Mindanao in 1999 and, although they did not train, they donated funds to the MILF’s welfare organizations.) Authorities determined that the other 13 were JI members, eight of whom had trained at al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, after undergoing religious and physical training in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia. Hambali, their leader in Malaysia and an Indonesian national, covertly entered Pakistan. Police in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines point to Hambali as the central figure in the Singaporean terrorist plots. Two foreign-



ers, code-named Sammy (an Arab) and Mike (a Filipino or Indonesian, described as a trainer and bomb-maker with the MILF) approached the Singaporean cell to attack targets in Singapore, including the U.S., Australian, British, and Israeli embassies.<sup>6</sup>

Al Qaeda's most striking features are its (1) ability to function in different countries, in which a few hundred senior and mid-level personnel handle specialized aspects of its operations; (2) function as "conduit" for militant Islamic organizations and *mujahidin* throughout the world, using informal alliances and different forms of linkages; (3) cooperative arrangements with allies, through which it shares manpower, acquires funding, and receives instructions from Osama bin Laden to render assistance to terrorist operations; and (4) ad hoc arrangements whereby temporary ties are established with other extremist groups based on mutual interests and goals.<sup>7</sup>

International terrorist groups and individuals have used the Philippines as a sanctuary or springboard for their third country operations. Terrorists have also used local allies to achieve their objectives, either directly or indirectly. In the mid-1990s, Ramzi Ahmed Youssef (the original World Trade Center bomber) and Abdul Hakim Murad established their operations in the Philippines.

Bin Laden's connections or linkages with Muslim extremists in the Southern Philippines may be seen in the following:

- 1) Murad, a Pakistani national, was a member of the terrorist cell operating in the Philippines under Youssef. Convicted for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and arrested in 1995, he revealed that one of his group's plans was to crash an aircraft against targets on the U.S. mainland. He had been in and out of the Philippines and took aircraft flying lessons in the Philippines, the United States, and elsewhere. The CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia appeared to be one of his group's targets.
- 2) Wali Kahn Amin Shah was arrested in January 1995. A close associate of Youssef, he admitted that he conducted training for the ASG in Mindanao.
- 3) Youssef visited Mindanao in early 1994 for the purpose of establishing cells to serve as contacts.

He allegedly trained ASG elements on modern explosive devices.

- 4) Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, convicted in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya, revealed that bin Laden's terrorist network participated in several operations in the Philippines in the early 1990s.
- 5) Wahis el Hage, charged with making false statements in connection with the Kenya bombing, revealed that al Qaeda has operatives in several countries, including the Philippines.
- 6) Mohamad Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden's brother-in-law, established NGOs and a business network in the Philippines under the guise of extending help to Muslims to propagate Islamic extremism and facilitate the flow of funds for local extremists.<sup>8</sup>
- 7) As early as 1995, al Qaeda was apparently running a training camp (Hudeibah) inside the former MILF's Camp Abubakar in Maguindanao where over 1,000 Indonesian *mujahidin* were said to have been training during 1996-1998.
- 8) A second al Qaeda camp, Camp Palestine, was located elsewhere in the same area of Mindanao.
- 9) In February 1999, western intelligence apparently monitored phone calls during which bin Laden asked MILF leader Hashim Salamat to set up more training camps for his operatives at a time when al Qaeda was already hard pressed in the Middle East following the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998.<sup>9</sup>
- 10) In March 2003, the ASG provided information that the ASG, the Pentagon Gang, and the MILF were provided training by al Qaeda operatives in the former MILF-held Camp Abubakar. The camp fell into government hands during the 2000 "total war" against the MILF launched by the Estrada administration. Moreover, the ASG said that it deployed special bombers to various parts of the Philippines to retaliate against the government for attacking and taking from the MILF the Buliok Complex in North Cotabato in February 2003, as well for the U.S. war on Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

From intelligence information uncovered by and shared among Southeast Asian authorities, it would appear that indeed Southeast Asia is part of an international terrorist network. But is the term "front" appropriate?

According to informed sources, some of the more significant terrorist attacks in the Philippines with the direct involvement or participation of foreign terrorists include:

- 1) The bombing attempt of the Thomas Jefferson Cultural Center in Makati on March 19, 1991, by Iraqi nationals
- 2) The bombing of Philippine Airlines flight 434 to Tokyo on December 11, 1994, by Youssef (this incident was interpreted by Philippine authorities as a dress rehearsal for 9/11 but was not taken seriously by the United States)
- 3) Preparations for Oplan Bojinka, a plan to assassinate Pope John Paul II and bomb 11 U.S. airliners over the Pacific Ocean, discovered when raiding the suspected hideout of Youssef's group in Malate, Manila in 1995
- 4) The attack on Ipil town in Zamboanga del Sur, where foreigners' presence was established, in April 1995 by the ASG
- 5) The suicide attack on the 6th Infantry Headquarters of the Philippine Army in Awant, Datu Sinsuat, Maguindanao by an Egyptian and a Saudi on October 4, 1997
- 6) Bombings of the Light Rail Transit in Manila in December 2000<sup>11</sup>

Authorities suspect MILF and ASG forces to have carried out other bombings in various parts of Mindanao, in retaliation for the military offensives against them, particularly in the Buliok Complex; the U.S. war in Iraq, in which the Philippines was a member of the coalition of the willing; and the global campaign against al Qaeda and members of its network that brought U.S. troops to Mindanao. Extremists (including the communist New People's army, tactically allied with the MILF since early this year) will likely step up bombing attacks if the ceasefire agreement between Manila and the MILF stalls. This would further drive the Macapagal-Arroyo government to cooperate militarily with the United States.

### REGIONAL COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS

Having awakened to the terrorist threat,<sup>12</sup> member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have concluded multilateral and bilateral agreements to combat terrorism in the region. The terrorism challenge has figured into the delibera-

tions of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), prompting fears of U.S. dominance in these regional institutions. Since East Timor's independence vote and 9/11, APEC's foraying into security matters—considered ARF's “turf,” since APEC is essentially an economic forum—has caused some uneasiness.

Among the counter-terrorism agreements forged involving states in Southeast Asia and their partners are the following:

- 1) 2001 ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism, summit of heads of state/government, Brunei, November 5, 2001
- 2) Agreement on May 7, 2002, to enhance cooperation in intelligence and information sharing among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, later joined by Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Singapore is reportedly acceding as well
- 3) Joint Communiqué of the Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism, Kuala Lumpur, May 20-21, 2002
- 4) Commitment of the 22nd ASEAN Chiefs of Police Conference (Aseanapol) to regional counter-terrorism efforts, May 2002
- 5) Joint Communiqué of the 35th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, “Responding to Challenges: Securing a Better Future,” giving full commitment to strengthening bilateral, regional, and international cooperation to counter terrorism, Brunei, July 29-30, 2002
- 6) Series of ARF workshops on counter-terrorism, April-October 2002
- 7) Agreement in ARF to freeze the financial assets of terrorist groups, August 2002
- 8) ASEAN-U.S. Joint Declaration to Combat International Terrorism, August 2002
- 9) Counter-terrorism declaration at APEC Leaders Meeting, November 2002
- 10) U.S.-Philippines joint exercises to upgrade the Philippine military to combat terrorism, since 2001
- 11) Agreement to enable the Philippine military to access excess military equipment of the United States already located in the Philippines
- 12) Bilateral counter-terrorism agreement between the Philippines and Australia, February 2003
- 13) Agreements, including the establishment of an ad hoc consultative committee, to combat international terrorism at the Copenhagen Summit of 2002, which included ASEAN participants



## PHILIPPINE COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

Apart from the multilateral and bilateral agreements mentioned above, the Philippines has adopted a 14-point program that focuses law enforcement on terrorism; establishes a Cabinet Oversight Committee on Internal Security to set strategy; designates the national security adviser to coordinate intelligence exchanges with foreign counterparts; tasks the Securities and Exchange Commission to conduct an inventory of organizations that might be involved in terrorist financing; synchronizes domestic with global counter-terrorism efforts; strengthens the national legal framework; promotes inter-cultural and inter-faith solidarity; etc.

Most significantly, starting in 2001 the Philippines embarked on joint military exercises with U.S. forces under the Balikatan framework. U.S. forces had no combat role, but trained Filipino soldiers and targeted the ASG with military technol-

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*Many U.S. policies are perceived as unfair, unbalanced and arrogant. Even friends of the United States are concerned that exercise of its power may be getting out of hand.*

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ogy. The operations reduced ASG forces and scattered them from their main base in Basilan province, and led to the death of one of the group's top leaders. Peace came to areas freed from ASG presence, and the Philippine military enhanced its counter-terrorism capabilities. The Philippines also benefited by the transfer of excess military equipment and supplies to the Philippine forces, under the Mutual Logistics and Supplies Agreement. In addition, the program also put the Philippines back on the strategic map of the region and enhanced the loyalty and gratitude of the military toward President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

### PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PEOPLE

How do the Philippine people feel about the presence of U.S. troops? There is no simple answer.

Government is divided by the issue, as can be seen by the resignation of Vice President and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teofisto Guingona, Jr., who subsequently spoke out publicly against U.S. troops in the Philippines and the president's support for the United States in the war against Iraq. Guingona was joined by left-wing politicians, certain faculty and students, laborers, farmers, fishermen, church-affiliated leaders, and others. The activists include those who call themselves "nationalists," but may be hardcore anti-U.S. groups. In anti-government Muslim communities, many claim that the presence of U.S. soldiers in Mindanao opens old wounds dating back to U.S. colonization and the Moro wars. Vehement protest is being revived as the two militaries prepare for new Balikatan exercises in 2003 in Sulu. Such events prompt Muslim mothers to sing of the Moro wars and revenge for U.S.-perpetrated injustices and cruelty—rather than ordinary lullabies.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of this opposition, a national survey shows that 84 percent of Filipinos approve of the presence of U.S. troops to fight terrorism.<sup>14</sup> In April, 2003, mayors of all towns in Sulu province expressed their support for the holding of the Balikatan exercises, with the Jolo mayor calling for a careful examination of the advantages and disadvantages for the province. In other instances, those communities affected by ASG activities were in support of the Balikatan exercises—once effectiveness in boosting Philippine military capacity was demonstrated. On the war in Iraq, however, no public opinion poll has yet been published; my own guess is that most Filipinos would support the coalition action, despite massive public demonstrations in Manila and other cities before the war started. Intellectuals are mostly against the war in the belief that war takes innocent lives and is unable to provide lasting solutions to problems.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The terrorist challenge is not likely to go away, as its roots are many and deep. Terrorism is caused not only by basic social, economic and political inequities, but also by foreign policies of great powers, especially the United States. Many U.S. policies are perceived as unfair, unbalanced, and arrogant. Even friends of the United States are concerned that exercise of its power may be getting out of hand, and its moral legitimacy to lead may be compromised—

not only in fighting authoritarianism and defending human liberties, but also in seeking a new system of global governance that addresses the technological, ideological and demographic transformations that have been unfolding during the past few decades. Such concerns could raise problems for the United States in fighting terrorism in Southeast Asia and making the Philippines the obvious base for such a campaign. Indeed, the Philippines is more open in supporting the U.S. than are other countries in the region, and the two countries have a standing Mutual Defense Treaty. However, the United States must work to improve its image in the Philippines and elsewhere, if it hopes to continue into the future the support it currently enjoys.

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