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Assess The Terrorist Threat In Southeast Asia. How Can Each Strand Best Be Countered? Devise A Strategy To Do So

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Key Judgements

- **Violent political groups in Southeast Asia have roots in long-standing local separatist or constitutional disputes.**
- **Radical Islam is not endemic in the region, nor is the region naturally receptive to it.**
- **But, perceptions of grievance, either from local repression or actions by western powers elsewhere (Iraq/Afghanistan) can create specific conditions for terrorism.**
- **Responses based on local solutions, soft counter-terrorism techniques and the rule of law are bearing fruit and should be supported.**
- **The West, especially the US, should continue to play discrete supporting role.**
- **Scope for greater regional co-operation within ASEAN to counter AQ and JI and for more integrated cross-government approaches.**

General

1. Political violence has been a consistent feature in Southeast Asia since WW2 and even before. It has taken several forms, including irredentist, ideological, separatist and religious, sometimes crossing these categories. The principal regional terrorism focus is Indonesia, although Thailand and the Philippines also have significant concerns in this respect. The issue has sharpened since 9/11 for three reasons:

- a. Increased western sensitivity to terrorism since 9/11.
- b. Bali and other terrorist attacks in the region.
- c. Increasing evidence of AQ and JI activity in region.

2. The response has varied between and within countries. Thailand's aggressive use of the military instrument contrasts with the Indonesian and Filipino emphasis on softer CT methods. These recognise the local, long-standing and particular nature of many movements (e.g. MILF, Poso, GAM) driven by ethnic, religious and other societal differences and the need to distinguish and separate such groups from AQ and JI. This has led to some successes, such as in Poso and Aceh, and most significantly, the increasing separation of JI from AQ. JI nevertheless, remains a threat in the region and will require a greater degree of international co-operation to counter it.

The Environment

3. The region has a mixture of majority muslim states, such as Indonesia, which has the largest muslim population in the world, Malaya and Brunei, or of

Christian or Buddhist states with muslim minorities, such as the Philippines and Thailand. There is a legacy of long-standing separatist groups, both Christian and Muslim and, in the past, of violence directed against ruling communist regimes or by communist groups. Poverty is widespread in rural areas. Porous borders, easy transfer of finance and materiel via long-standing economic and trade links, weak central government control, widespread base levels of criminal activity and corruption and large supplies of weapons make Southeast Asian states 'countries of convenience' for terrorists. Other factors have had a catalytic effect:

- a. Perceived injustices of western action in Afghanistan and Iraq are central to radicalisation of extremists.
- b. Inspiration of radical Islamic resistance in Afghanistan in 1980s.
- c. Effects of 1997 financial crisis on governments' capability and economies of disadvantaged areas – made radical religious alternative more attractive.
- d. External religious funding of separatist movements (e.g. MILF).

Terrorist Groups

4. AQ have been active in the region from the late 1980s and are believed to have been involved in planning attacks on airlines and other bombings and assassinations. Some have succeeded, but there have been notable SF successes in Singapore and the Philippines. AQ's engagement in the region prior to 2002 may have been eased by the failure, particularly of the Indonesian government, to acknowledge the existence of a radical Islamic terrorist threat.

5. JI is an Indonesian group with regional capabilities which seeks to establish an independent Islamic state encompassing, Indonesia, Malaysia and southern islands of the Philippines. JI is believed to have been behind the 2002 Bali bombing and has links with muslim separatist groups in the region (e.g. MILF). More recently JI radicalised elements in Poso instigating violence. Before 2002 the Indonesian government effectively had a policy of denial of the terrorist threat. This was sharply exposed by the Bali and subsequent attacks and the relative speed with which the Indonesian authorities have been able to reduce the threat since then demonstrates the inherent narrowness and shallowness of JI's support base. Splits may be developing between the military and ideological wings of JI on the legitimacy of the use of violence. The arrest of key leaders in 2007 is likely to accelerate this process.

6. Separatist and irredentist groups include GAM in Indonesia, MILF and Abu Sayyef in the Philippines and Islamic separatists in southern Thailand.

Responses

7. There are three broad approaches in the region. Thailand has responded aggressively to the separatist threat. The conflict has intensified. The political problems in Thailand, exemplified by the 2007 military coup, may limit the

government's ability to engage with the communities and develop a broader strategy to address the crisis.

8. In contrast, Singapore and Indonesia have developed broader strategies. Although these societies have strong Islamic foundations, they are intrinsically inimicable to the fundamentalist doctrines of AQ. Government responses have therefore concentrated on isolating the extremists, addressing social grievances (as in Poso), encouraging defection and where necessary arresting and prosecuting cases through the courts. Needless to say, such an approach has been intelligence based with discrete US and Australian technical support. Underpinning the Indonesian approach is the intent to avoid the government being seen as an enemy of Islam. Of note is the lack of credible reports of the use of torture by the Indonesian authorities to break the terrorist rings. In Indonesia, there has been significant institutional improvement, with the creation of the highly effective Task Force 88 and the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement, both with discrete western support. One area which may need improvement is the handling of convicted terrorists in the correction system.

9. The Philippines government, backed by the US and assisted to a lesser extent by Australia, is taking a more militarized approach. The two main terrorist groups Abu Sayyaf (an extremist group linked to JI) and the MILF (a separatist group) are different but have led to broad categorisation of all muslims as a threat. The military has had some success, reducing AS from about 1,000 in 2001 to about 200 now. The US is supporting a civil action campaign which involves building and supporting social infrastructure, the aim being to drive a wedge between rebels and the muslim population. However, there are concerns that in pursuing their goal to defeat AS and its mainly Indonesian jihadi allies, the authorities are casting the net too widely and creating unnecessary enemies. Government talks with MILF have fallen apart, in part as a result of this approach but more specifically because of a recent judicial ruling that the government's approach of devolving provincial authority in Milo is unconstitutional, has caused and impasse.

Regional Cooperation

10. The international approach in the region is characterized more by bilateral and trilateral agreements than a comprehensive regional approach. This may reflect the history and nature of the region, which is still influenced by deep seated feelings of suspicion and distrust. Although ASEAN has provided an umbrella organisation through which multilateral consultation has to some extent complemented domestic and sub-regional efforts, it has not been able to promote a collective strategy against terrorism and sea piracy. Given the nature of the region's geography, there may well be scope for ASEAN to take a more proactive role in addressing issues such as the porosity of borders, transnational crime and terrorist finance.

11. More specifically, although the strength of bilateral relationships was widely acknowledged across the region as being strong, there was persistent concern at the lack of cross boundary information sharing between different parts of governments, a key issue given the need for comprehensive multi-agency

responses. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence that co-operation at the operator level is strong.

Strategy

11. The long-standing and essentially local nature of the majority of the terrorist activity in South east Asia is the key factor driving the following recommended strategy:

- The over-riding aim should be to maintain and increase the separation and division between the 3 strands, separatist, regional Islamic and AQ.
- All efforts must be led by the respective national governments. Specialist Western support should be provided 'on tap' not 'on top'.
- In addressing violent regional Islamic groups, the main effort should be on reconciliation and pursuit through investigative and judicial means, reinforcing the strong Indonesian lead in this respect. For separatist movements, increased devolution of provincial government within a federal system should be considered. This may require amendment of national constitutions, as in the Philippines.
- The Centre of excellence at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement should be further developed as a regional centre.
- There is scope for greater co-operation and information sharing at the regional level through ASEAN building on the strong bilateral linkages already established.

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