

COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: COMBATING THE PERSISTENT THREAT OF TERRORISM

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Abstract

Extremist groups in Southeast Asia, with their diverse beliefs, fuel the ever-shifting threat of terrorism. Southeast Asian nations face meaningful challenges in their counterterrorism efforts. This abstract examines these challenges and the strategies to address them. It examines how community involvement and intelligence sharing can help lessen the threat. Regional cooperation can also reduce this threat. Southeast Asian nations must considerably improve their intelligence capabilities, encourage greater regional cooperation and tackle the root causes of extremism through all-embracing governance and large socioeconomic development. CVE programs build community resilience. They also challenge extremist narratives.

Strong governmental counterterrorism efforts have been in place since 9/11 and the Bali bombings. However, Southeast Asia remains threatened by terrorism. The Marawi occupation and later attacks in several Indonesian areas show this. Regional defence authorities agree that ASEAN must improve its collaborative counterterrorism efforts. Security experts concur, suggesting military deployments are necessary.

This abstract examines the development of terrorism, its expansion into cyberterrorism and international networks and the influence of social media on the dissemination of extremism. In short, a thorough strategy dealing with terrorism's root causes—poverty, inequality and political grievances—is important, respecting all human rights and upholding the rule of law.

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Introduction

Unfortunately, despite its pervasive nature as a global issue throughout recorded history up to the present day, there is no single definitive understanding of what terrorism means. The term 'terrorism' is believed to have originated as a result of the events following the French Revolution of 1789. The term was first used for the period between 1793 and 1794, known as the "Reign of Terror" in France. But no one has clarified the definition of terrorism. In an overview of the US-based Terrorism Research Centre, it is lamented: "As history has illustrated, terrorism is by nature an elusive term to fully define. The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), also based in Scotland, admits the formidable challenge in putting forth a watertight definition of terrorism. The Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC)—an independent think-tank created by members of the United Nations (UN)—acknowledges that it can be extremely difficult to define the term 'terrorism'. Notably, the Council for Asian Terrorism Research (CATR), the largest network of terrorism think tanks in the Asia Pacific, also concedes that the term 'terrorism' is extremely difficult to define.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional governmental organisation in South-East Asia, founded in 1967. It includes a group of 10 Southeast Asian countries – Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Brunei. The agenda of ASEAN is to improve the economic, political and security co-operation between the countries of the members. ASEAN is arguably the most resilient and enduringly placed free trade regime this side of the EU. ASEAN is one of the most effective regional organisations that has tried to deal with a lot of regional matters among both member and non-member nations. Among these challenges that have impacted the Asian region in terms of peace and security, terrorism remains one of the most pressing. Asians will continue to

work together to fight international and transnational terrorism. The threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia is where global, regional, and national levels intersect. In the context of the history of this region, terrorism as a threat did not make real sense until the shock of 11 September and the Bali bombings of 12 October. As a result, ASEAN declared a war, but this declaration did not come out of an agreement from all of the members. Regional agreement and cooperation had a setback due to the varying domestic interests primarily between Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. By its very nature the threat of transnational terrorism cannot be dealt with single-handedly by any one state. As ostensible as is the case, terrorists are undoubtedly borderless and prefer to hitch a ride with another terror force.

As a crime, terrorism violates the human rights of the people. As a regional grouping, ASEAN stands firm against terrorism in all its forms. Proper coordination on all fronts with the United Nations in the war against terrorism. It paved the way for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, which establishes the basis for the building of a peaceful and developed community. Elimination of the terror cannot be achieved without assistance from international communities and their member states cooperating. In view of this, the research is being undertaken. There is little doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukrainian war, with its shadow of a China-US rivalry deal, have certainly reduced the sting of the threat of terror. We don't hear of terrorist news events these days, and that may be due to the fact that the threat may have subsided. That said, the unravelling of terrorism in the region had in no way been wiped out altogether, as terrorist groups in southeast Asia would still have the political will to exercise violence. It probably had more to do with the Taliban victory in Afghanistan. Even the Singaporean defence minister has surveyed the landscape and concluded that "with the resumption of global travel, terrorism may resurge." The threat of terrorism in southeast Asia is international, national and regional. This is a transnational threat (STATE vs STATE), which cannot be fought by one state alone and requires a universal response.

Although the nature of the threat is growing less, and despite the agreement signed by the states, coordination and capacity building remain desperately inadequate. To some degree, the concepts of non-interference and state sovereignty with which ASEAN has traditionally played have hindered regional coordination. This paper discusses the current existing terror menace in the South-East Asian region and the efforts made so far by ASEAN to combat it.

Challenges in Combating Terrorism South-East Asia

Increasing military-led counterterrorism in Southeast Asia. The rule-based regional security framework of ASEAN, which has promoted norms and values including the prohibition against the use of force to resolve disputes, immunity in interstate relations, and non-interference on the basis of territorial sovereignty, does not protect the right to use armed forces that are engaged outside of borders. The pejorative character of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency coincides with application in the particularities of the Southeast Asian region, especially arguing that the nature of the intimidation threat is always symbiotic with the needs of the insurgency.

There are two such implications that stand out: the inflation of the place and the role of the military in the Southeast Asian security agenda. One is the possibility of strengthening democracy. The cloud of terrorism hanging over Southeast Asia allows more lethargy on the part of the military in expanding their role in the political process, where civil society is minimally engaged in the strategic policy process of individual states and ASEAN as a regional body. Army-led counterterrorism operations can hardly be predicted to conform with the basics of democracy and human rights. Counterterrorism remains a key rationale for the armed forces having to be modernising or innovative. So here comes the second implication: with the presence of external actors deeply interested in regional developments, the security of Southeast Asia is becoming relatively more complicated, as the varying levels and policies of military capabilities of the ASEAN members will still continue. ASEAN, with the shared universal idealism of a multilateral investor in the Southeast Asian

region, ironically cannot evolve beyond its own conceptual constraints. Cooperation as an institutionalised mechanism in respect to military cooperation, whether referring to the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM) or ADMM+, cannot play roles which translate to compliance amongst member states. Collectively, these strains on ASEAN centrality as a driver of regional security problem-solving. ASEAN internal solidarity is affected by the actions undertaken by the tasking of its armed forces to counter-terrorism undertaken by some member states with commitments that even bring other member states into joint operations in Southeast Asia.

Further, state boundary disputes and other historical factors have historically limited the amount of political and security progressiveness that ASEAN has been able to achieve. The APSC's resolve to establish centrality is tested by post-Marawi developments and terror events in Indonesia. Centring means encouraging adherence to norms and rules. However, such an ASEAN common and core foreign policy tool is more or less ignored by the tendency of a number of members, namely in tackling the acts of terrorism. Collective interests in ASEAN are set aside in favour of national threat assessments.

Initiative by ASEAN for Counter – Terrorism

A combination of public and foreign policies that narrow the range of possibilities of terrorist groups or organisations is the most effective way to tackle terrorism. These measures have been appropriated, from freezing financial assets to terrorist organisation raids to providing military and economic assistance to countries against terrorism to counter-terrorism facilitation and implementation policies and agreements, etc. ASEAN measures against terrorism through a comprehensive approach that has

It evolved over time. Southeast Asia had little top priority on terrorism issues before 1999. In its original approach, the approach taken was conventional with respect to viewing terrorism through the lens of an ordinary criminal activity at the ground level; there was overlapping of terrorism and other transnational crimes like money laundering, drugs and trafficking of people,

etc. Post 9/11, there was selective propaganda of the USA and the West against Islam and Muslims.

Western media attempted to compare terrorism with Islam. This humiliation infuriated and enraged the Muslims, who have eventually started getting a grudge against the West. For such perceptions came to have a considerable impact on the South-East Asian region, which is home to more than 225 million Muslims. Thus, ASEAN would have to deal with the threat without being seen as siding with the US on its war against terrorism. Effective fiction such as that used by the terrorist entities is unable to stand on its own ground, or at least this symbolic nature of the terrorism must have to be converted into the political reality of rationality and practicality, which in turn must be dealt with in a multi-cooperation process. Asia is also distinctive in the large number of multilateral security frameworks, conventions and accords on counter-terrorism. Through ASEAN too, the countries endeavoured to evolve a common political identity to deal with the security-related concerns in this region of paradoxes. This led to the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994.

There are two issues that are at the core of ARF. First and foremost, the ARF is primarily focused on the development of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security-related matters of common interest and concern. Second, it also greatly contributes to the efforts of confidence building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

Alongside diversities in handling insurgencies, ASEAN formulated its own strategy for combating terrorism due to the poverty of the South-East Asian region. ASEAN's anti-terrorism policy epitomises the traditional approach to conflict resolution, which focusses on managing the problem rather than eliminating it. This regional entity is severely limited in its capacity to combat terrorism with a deeper commitment to the 'ASEAN Way' that ASEAN has opted for. Terrorism cannot be eliminated but can be limited by bilateral or

multilateral agreements. The fight against terrorism may only be accomplished through substantive and binding resolutions that are implemented and the prevention of arms trafficking, consequently cutting the access of funding to terrorist organisations and illegal activities within the region. ASEAN will have to be less rigid on the rule of non-interference. This requires states to accommodate the prospect of external intervention regarding internal armed conflicts.

These barriers will need to be lowered in the ASEAN states to ensure both greater regional coordination and more security integrity. Undoubtedly the importance of ASEAN to wipe out terrorism from South-East Asia. It concerns the cushy region of peace and safety.

While the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia predated 9-11, regional cooperation against terrorism was much more pronounced after the attacks of 9-11. Some Southeast Asian nations even went as far as denying the existence of terrorist threats in their countries when confronted by the strong US declaration days after 9/11 that Southeast Asia was to be the second front against terrorism for the GWOT. Southeast Asian nations were not serious about the virulent terrorist threat, convinced at least until the 2002 Bali bombing.

Although ASEAN is limp in facing the regional security threats, ASEAN represents the most critical organisation in Southeast Asia, which is responsible for regional cooperation issues dealing with the process of terrorism. Since 9/11 alone, ASEAN has made numerous declarations and statements on the region's commitment to the effort against terror. That said, ASEAN countries have not got a very good record in terms of turning these declarations and statements into actions at the collective level due to an enduring regional norm that is so strict about the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its members.

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