

The Myth of the Second Front: Localizing the 'War on Terror' in Southeast Asia

Terrorism became an important part of Southeast Asia's regional security concerns on September 11, 2001, but the terrorist attack on Bali in October 2002 brought the issue home. Even before that attack, an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) spokesman had claimed that "international terrorism is probably the most serious security threat in the region since the Indochina conflict."¹ At their January 2007 summit, ASEAN leaders reiterated "the grave danger posed by terrorism to innocent lives, infrastructure and the environment, regional and international peace and stability as well as to economic development."²

ASEAN's efforts to deal with the challenge through regional cooperation, however, have been hampered by a lack of agreement among its members on the nature and implications of terrorism as a threat to regional order. These differences reflect varying domestic and historical roots of terrorist threats in the region and its impact. Moreover, the members' varying counterinsurgency capabilities and their common noninterference mind-set create political sensitivities that constrain regional cooperation. Weak national capacities and regional cooperation have opened the door for outside powers, especially the United States, to be involved in regional counterterrorism efforts.

Nonetheless, the United States and other global powers must be mindful of the political sensitivities of the Muslim-majority nations and tailor their policies to the differing perceptions of the terrorist threat held by various countries in the region. With the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

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summit approaching in September, the United States should resist the impulse to push for a regional counterterrorism consensus. Southeast Asia is not a region that lends itself to sweeping initiatives geared toward winning the “second front” of the global war on terrorism.

Although multilateral cooperation against terrorism is desirable, divergent interests, sensitivities, and fears about adverse domestic reactions make it

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extremely difficult for the adoption of a U.S.-inspired counterterrorism strategy on a regional basis in Southeast Asia. Because many Muslims see the United States’ global war on terrorism as a global war on Islam, the resistance to Washington’s one-size-fits-all counterterrorism initiatives would remain strong especially among Muslim-majority countries in the region. Moreover, Washington stands to lose ground against Beijing’s diplomatic drive to court regional countries on other, equally important

economic and strategic issues if it remains narrowly focused on counterterrorism cooperation alone.

Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Until the September 11 attacks, the security concerns of ASEAN members revolved around the impact of a rising China on the regional balance of power, the prospects for Chinese-U.S. power rivalry, and the dangers of war in regional flashpoints: the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, Kashmir, and the Spratly Islands. ASEAN governments also had to grapple with interstate tensions, such as territorial disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia and between Singapore and Malaysia, and internal strife, especially in Indonesia after the downfall of the Suharto regime in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Even before the September 11 attacks, Southeast Asia was attracting the interest of al Qaeda. Several of the region’s homegrown radical Islamic groups sent their members to receive training and participate in jihad in Afghanistan. Since the early 1990s, al Qaeda’s influence has spread across the geographical spectrum of Southeast Asia with well-entrenched and extensive networks.³ Several countries in the region—Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines—featured in al Qaeda’s most ambitious plans, including its attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 and the September 11 attacks.⁴ For example, Tawfiq bin Attash, an al Qaeda operative involved in the USS Cole attack, planned and prepared for operations with Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar, two of the 9/11 hijackers, in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. Similarly,

Malaysian Yazid Sufaat, who was responsible for al Qaeda's anthrax project in Afghanistan, arranged lodging for the hijackers and used the cover of his wife's company in Kuala Lumpur to provide employment documents for Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged 20th hijacker for the September 11 attacks, to gain access to the United States.⁵

Southeast Asia appears to have been more of a transit, support, and facilitation point rather than an operational hub or a target in itself in al Qaeda's strategy. Southeast Asia's large Muslim population, porous borders, and weaknesses of central authority made it susceptible to networking between al Qaeda and regional terrorist groups as well as among the latter. Al Qaeda developed contacts with Islamist militant groups, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, and helped them to establish an extensive training and support infrastructure. Al Qaeda also developed ties with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian Islamist group, and developed it as a regional network. JI's objective to establish a pan-Islamic state encompasses countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

In Southeast Asia, JI developed a very complex web of networks and links with like-minded Islamist groups across the region, including the MILF; the ASG in the Philippines; Kumpulan Militant Malaysian in Malaysia; and the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), an alliance of about 100 radical and militant groups.⁶ It effectively became the platform on which the groups could "cooperate and share resources for training, procurement of arms, financial assistance, and terrorist operations."⁷ The transfer of al Qaeda ideology and its Afghan combat experience to local militant organizations raised the level of sophistication and the capacity for violence of these groups. This also led the homegrown groups to embrace al Qaeda's pan-Islamist objectives of global jihad.

Despite loss of some popular support after the Jakarta Marriot bombings in August 2003 and the Australian embassy bombings in Jakarta in September 2004, in which Muslim civilians were the largest casualties, fundamentalist Islamic theology has a continuing and perhaps expanding hold in the region. Islamist groups are sustaining their appeal by exploiting not just the events in the Middle East, such as the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, but also the internal problems in their respective countries. There has been a proliferation of jihadi groups and Web sites in recent years. The international or regional group affiliations of radical Islamists have become less significant. For example, the bulk of the attacks after the October 2002 Bali bombings were conducted by

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persons such as Azahari Hussin and Noordin Top, who operate on a semi-autonomous basis.⁸ Because the JI now functions in a much decentralized manner, there is no longer any consultation with the central command on the operations to be carried out.

Southeast Asian governments have achieved some successes in degrading the operational capabilities of major terrorist groups such as JI and ASG. JI is now fragmented, its original structure destroyed, and its leadership decimated and left disoriented. From the documents recovered recently in Indonesia, it would appear that the JI might have put its pan-Islamic objectives on hold for the time being at least. In the Philippines, military operations have managed to cripple the top leadership of the ASG. The JI elements operating with the ASG are on the run. This has created some hope that the remnants of JI and their hosts in southern Philippines would either be killed or captured in the near future. Since the second terrorist attack on Bali in 2005, there has been no major terrorist incident in the region. The only groups that seem to be relatively more active are in southern Thailand. Yet, the nature of their attacks is quite low key, and their impact is largely localized, notwithstanding the escalation of violence beyond the southern provinces, especially to Bangkok.

It would be premature to write off the threats from Islamist groups in Southeast Asia. The absence of high-profile terrorist attacks in the region could be due as much to the preoccupation of the jihadists in Iraq and Afghanistan as to the success of law enforcement actions by countries in the region. Moreover, despite arrests and major disruptions by the Indonesian authorities, JI appears to be resilient, highly flexible, and indefatigable. It has survived, implementing rapid leadership transitions and fundamental structural changes while continuing its regeneration. Reports from Indonesia suggest that the JI could be in a building and consolidation phase. Although it has avoided large attacks that could potentially weaken its support base, operations that could be both religiously justified and popular enough to attract new recruits cannot be ruled out.⁹ The recent arrest of Abdul Basheer, a Singaporean “home-grown” militant, testifies to the persistence and spread of the radical ideology in the region.

The Myth of the Second Front

Southeast Asia’s terrorist presence is far from monolithic and does not directly correlate to the Middle Eastern version, as groups vary in their purpose, targets, and geographic reach. Middle Eastern groups including al Qaeda and its affiliates target both the “near enemy,” apostate regimes in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and the “far enemy,” referring to the West, especially the United States, which is seen to be supportive of apostate regimes. Southeast Asian

radical groups focus more exclusively on the near enemy. The JI and MMI in Indonesia, for example, are seeking the replacement of “un-Islamic” governments that they view as corrupt, undemocratic, inefficient, and in many cases subservient to the West.

Some groups seek to punish rival ethnic groups in a situation of ethnic hatred and conflict. Groups such as the Laskar Jihad in Indonesia, for example, espouse a militant Islamist ideology but usually target local groups such as Christians in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi. Still others, such as groups in the Philippines, southern Thailand, and Aceh and West Papua in Indonesia, are advocating separation from the central governments based on ethno-nationalist sentiments.

Moreover, some radical groups in Southeast Asia that have been accused of terrorism by the governments, including the Free Aceh Movement in Aceh, the MILF in the Philippines, and the Pattani United Liberation Organization in southern Thailand, are inclined to settle their disputes and grievances through negotiation, in contrast to the zero-sum mind-set of groups such as al Qaeda.

The manifestation of jihad among the Islamic radical groups in Southeast Asia is not the same as that of their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Southeast Asian Islamic radicals focus more on the political aspects of jihad rather than just the religious and tactical aspects, such as the methods of attacks, as is the case with their counterparts in the Middle East. Southeast Asian groups would renounce violence and focus on political means as long as the end result is the establishment of an Islamic state or the implementation of Islamic jurisprudence. There is no explicit aversion on their part to achieve these objectives through the existing political framework. Documents posted on some of the Southeast Asian radical Islamic Web sites suggest that the creation of an Islamic state would address the problems confronting the Muslim community, create responsible and trustworthy leaders, provide every individual access to political participation, and equally distribute the country's wealth among its citizens.¹⁰ This creation need not necessarily involve the use of violence.

This means-end debate—whether violent means are justified to achieve the goal of an Islamic state—is very much discernible within JI itself. Support for the pro-bombing faction has declined substantially in favor of a mainstream faction that advocates an open socialization process leading to the implementation of Shari'a and the creation of an Islamic state. The use of violence for many of the groups in Southeast Asia, with the notable exception of the ASG and the JI faction led by Noordin Top, could be a last resort and not necessar-

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ily their main tactic. This rationale stands in marked contrast to groups in the Middle East who espouse violence in order to achieve an Islamic state.

Terrorism and extremism in Southeast Asia have very strong local roots. To be sure, without al Qaeda's ideological and financial support and training, local extremist groups could not have carried out attacks such as those in Bali or Jakarta. Like their counterparts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia's terrorist groups have been united by a common dislike of the United States and its policies in the Middle East, including the invasion of Iraq. These groups also draw inspiration from the pan-Islamic ideology of al Qaeda. Terrorism in Southeast Asia, however, cannot be viewed solely as the handiwork of al Qaeda. Regional hotspots of terrorist activity today, such as southern Philippines and southern Thailand, are arenas of old-fashioned nationalist or ethno-nationalist movements. They predate the September 11 attacks and even the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad from which al Qaeda emerged in the early 1980s.

More radical Muslim groups also view the impact of U.S. policies in the region through the lens of local issues. An article posted on the Web site of radical group Hizbut Tahrir, for example, accused the United States of using its diplomatic influence and economic assistance to acquire local resources; expand its military presence in the region, especially in the Strait of Malacca; and manipulate the syllabi of religious schools in Indonesia.¹¹ Many Web sites discussing the plight of Muslims in southern Thailand refer to historical grievances such as Bangkok's attempt to assimilate the Malays with repressive policies without almost any reference to global issues. The impact of such local grievances appears to be more salient than al Qaeda's global ideology, as the former tends to be more focused on bread-and-butter issues and domestic politics.

Regional Terrorism Is Mainly Local, Not Global

National perspectives about the extent of the danger posed by terrorism to national security and regional order differ throughout Southeast Asia. Their perception of and response to the threat is influenced by domestic constraints and how states balance terrorism with other significant political and security concerns.

Singapore maintains an uncompromising posture on the general issue of terrorism and its nonsecular (Islamic) character. As a senior official put it, "It may not be politically correct to focus on the relationship between Islam and terrorism. However...what [JI members] were...taught was that to be a good, genuine Muslim, you would have to hate the West, bring down secular, pro-Western governments in the region, and pave the way for an Islamic regional government."¹² As the country is heavily dependent on foreign trade and tourism, the impact of a terrorist attack could be catastrophic for its economy. A terrorist attack, claims the government, also has the potential to tear apart

Singapore's multiracial and multireligious social fabric.¹³ As a result, Singapore has openly allied itself with the West, particularly the United States, not only on business and commercial ventures but also on global security and strategic issues.

Indonesia is somewhat less willing to link itself to U.S. views on global terrorism. After the September 11 attacks, President Megawati Soekarnoputri visited the United States and expressed her sympathies for the tragedy—a significant gesture coming from the head of state of the world's largest Muslim democracy. Mainstream Muslim intelligentsia in Indonesia, however, were not inclined to accept the fact that there could be radical elements among them wishing to establish a caliphate and prepared to kill innocent civilians to achieve that objective.¹⁴ It was only after the 2002 Bali bombings that a more proactive stance against terrorism emerged.

Nevertheless, Jakarta does not acknowledge terrorism as an existential threat as Singapore, Australia, or the United States do. Despite several attacks clearly linked to JI, Jakarta continues to be hesitant to ban the organization. For Indonesia, terrorism is a political issue, closely tied to domestic political dynamics. Counterterrorism and electoral politics make uneasy bedfellows in a newly democratic nation. In the aftermath of the Bali bombings, Western nations expected the Indonesian government to move decisively to bring the perpetrators to justice. Because this would have meant granting more authority to the government, however, civil society elements in Indonesia raised concerns about its implications for democratization and civil liberties. Fearing that legislation might lend itself to political abuse by the security forces, they evoked memories of the Suharto era when state agencies would stage violent incidents to suppress the opposition to the regime.

Malaysia has also been wary about linking terrorism with Islam despite JI's distinct Islamic roots. For Kuala Lumpur's ruling elite, transnational terrorism is the product of Western misdeeds against the broader Muslim community. There is an ambivalent and sometimes hostile perception of the policies of the United States, which is seen to be anti-Islam and oppressive of Muslims worldwide. As a result, Kuala Lumpur has been disinclined to accept the links of Malaysian political and religious organizations to the global al Qaeda network and has been ambivalent about cracking down on businesses serving as front companies channeling funds to al Qaeda.¹⁵ Islamist groups had used the country as a meeting ground and procurement base for a number of attacks, including the bombing of the USS Cole as well as the September 11 attacks, and foiled attempts to target U.S. and Singaporean interests, but the country

**Southeast Asian
radical groups focus
on the near enemy.**

has not suffered any major terrorist attack or been the target of any major terrorist operation.

Thailand and the Philippines are somewhat inclined to downplay terrorism for the sake of domestic politics. Both countries have significant Muslim minorities in their southern provinces seeking to establish separate homelands

Long-simmering bilateral tensions continue to hamper effective intelligence exchange.

in protest against perceived injustice and policies of repression by the central government. The conflicts in these countries, however, are mostly ethno-nationalist struggles resulting largely from an unsuccessful integration of the Muslim population into the mainstream. A tendency therefore exists to identify these conflicts as domestic insurgencies with local implications rather than part of global jihad with wider implications. After the January 2004 resurgence of violence in southern Thailand, the government

of Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra conveniently preferred to associate terrorist incidents as “the work of the thugs and gangsters.”¹⁶

Bangkok denied the possibility of Thailand’s southern provinces being used as training bases and staging sites for terrorist attacks, a denial that included its “madrassahs [being] used by the Muslim radicals” or that the JI “had even come into the country.”¹⁷ Bangkok’s position changed significantly after May 2003 arrests of JI members plotting to stage terrorist strikes in Bangkok and tourist places in Pattaya and Phuket, coinciding with the APEC summit in October 2003. Bangkok now understands that it has a serious Muslim insurgency with the possible involvement of outside groups on its hands. If left unattended, the conflict, which is at present predominantly local in nature, might get sucked into the global jihadi movement with serious implications for the security of the region. The post-Thaksin government is thus attempting to address the problem with policies that would ameliorate the root grievances in the southern provinces.

Similarly, Manila is constrained by its complex terrorist threat. The threats from Islamist groups such as ASG and MILF and their ties to JI notwithstanding, Manila has to contend with an equally virulent threat from a Communist insurgency, which domestically undermines its rule significantly.¹⁸ Much of the stability in the southern Philippines now hinges on the outcome of Manila’s peace negotiations with MILF. This has constrained the government from taking any action against the group for allegedly harboring JI elements from Indonesia. Until recently, Manila was reluctant to admit that JI elements continue to operate and receive training in the Philippines, especially after the military overran and destroyed camp Abu Bakr in Mindanao, where al Qaeda and JI elements trained during the 1990s.

Many countries in the region have to deal with a host of other domestic issues that they consider more salient than the threats from terrorism. Economic and political instability are matters of greater concern for countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia has to cope with natural disasters such as the December 2004 tsunami. Indonesia and other countries have been exposed to the danger of pandemics such as SARS and bird flu.

The potential impact of terrorism on economic well-being also factors into differing perceptions of the threat. Indonesia would be considerably more affected than Thailand or Malaysia. Its fragile economy, which has yet to recover from the 1997 financial crisis, is particularly vulnerable to terrorist attacks targeted at tourism infrastructure and businesses, especially those run by Western multinationals. Singapore, which is heavily dependent on maritime trade, views disruptions in the sea lanes of communication in the Malacca Strait involving piracy or terrorism with serious concern. Indonesia, on the other hand, is the least dependent of the three littoral states on sea-borne international trade.

Finally, sensitivity to sovereignty issues makes some states disinclined to allow foreign presences in their territory for the sake of counterterrorism. Both Malaysia and Indonesia are fiercely protective against any outside interference in their waters, which explains their virulent protest against the U.S.-proposed Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) to secure Southeast Asian waters against piracy and terrorism threats. Even domestic extremist groups such as MMI have offered help to the Indonesian navy to drive out the U.S. fleet if it came to the Malacca Straits.¹⁹ Malaysia has felt that a foreign military presence in its territorial waters would set it back in its "ideological battle against extremism and militancy."²⁰ Kuala Lumpur fears that highly visible U.S. naval operations undertaken for the sake of suppressing terrorism would be exploited by militant groups to mobilize support for their cause and to discredit the government's counterterrorism policy, which is supposed to rely less on direct military action and more on winning hearts and minds.²¹

The Limits of Counterterrorist Cooperation

Despite these complexities, Southeast Asian nations have forged some counterterrorism cooperation. In November 2001, ASEAN called on its member states to ratify all relevant international antiterrorist conventions. To combat terrorism, ASEAN as well as larger regional groupings, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the APEC grouping, have undertaken a number of initiatives, including mechanisms to share information, intelligence, and best practices and to build law enforcement and investigation capabilities of the agencies of respective member countries. One of the important early initia-

tives undertaken in the region is the Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures, signed by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in 2002 and joined in 2003 by Brunei, Cambodia, and Thailand. This agreement provides for antiterrorism exercises, combined operations to hunt suspected terrorists, and the establishment of hotlines as well as the sharing of airline passenger lists.

Sovereignty concerns have often complicated regional agreements.

In January 2007, ASEAN members signed the ASEAN Convention on Counter-terrorism to provide a framework for deeper regional cooperation to counter, prevent, and suppress terrorism. Provisions for rapid information sharing and the establishment of a common database, as well as common procedures for prosecution and extradition, make the convention significantly different from some of the earlier regional ini-

tatives.²² The legally binding nature of the convention is surprisingly ambitious given ASEAN's preference for nonlegalistic measures of cooperation. ASEAN's initiatives to deal with terrorism, however, have included little in terms of concrete operational counterterrorism mechanisms. ASEAN countries continue to cooperate against terrorism primarily in an ad hoc manner and with outside powers, particularly the United States and to a lesser extent Australia.

Long-simmering bilateral tensions and distrust, such as that between Singapore and Malaysia and between Singapore and Indonesia, continue to hamper the effective exchange of sensitive counterterrorism intelligence. Malaysia and Singapore have a number of outstanding issues, including disputes over territory and water, as do Malaysia and the Philippines.

Varying levels of capability and differing legal and criminal justice systems in the individual countries have been obstacles to closer regional cooperation. Malaysia and Singapore could take the swiftest and toughest law enforcement actions against JI elements operating in their respective countries with the help of their Internal Security Acts, which are a holdover from British colonial rule. The failure of Indonesia and the Philippines to control terrorism in their respective countries could be partly due to the absence of similar legal provisions.

For example, Indonesia's efforts to bring the perpetrators of the Bali bombings to justice suffered a setback when, in an order in July 2004, its Constitutional Court voided the retroactive application of Indonesia's antiterrorism law. Although safeguards against creation of ex post facto laws is not uncommon, what was significant here was the opinion of the court that bombings such as those that occurred in Bali could not be classified as extraordinary crimes to warrant a retroactive application. Similarly, after much haggling,

Manila enacted the Philippines Human Security Act in 2007 to deal with terrorism, but its supporters see the act as having too many safeguards to have real teeth, while human rights and advocacy groups conversely argue that the new law is a license for "martial law, widespread political killings, [and] the militarization of Metro Manila."²³

Finally, sovereignty concerns often have complicated agreements at the regional level. For example, the 2007 ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism seeks to define terrorism within the scope of treaties dating back to the 1970s, all of which stress the principle of noninterference.²⁴ This agreement, as well as the November 2005 ASEAN Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, gives domestic laws precedence over implementation of various provisions mentioned in the treaty.

The Case for Differentiation

Since declaring Southeast Asia to be the second front in the war on terrorism in early 2002,²⁵ Washington has stepped up its cooperation with ASEAN members in combating terrorism. A prominent example is the 2002 ASEAN-U.S. Joint Declaration to Combat Terrorism, which seeks to create "a framework for cooperation to prevent, disrupt and combat international terrorism through the exchange and flow of information, intelligence and capacity-building."²⁶ Yet, Washington's involvement in Southeast Asia's war on terrorism faces acute political barriers.

Both mainstream Islamic and secular nationalist groups view the U.S. role with serious misgivings. Historically, U.S. policies in the Middle East have fueled suspicions that Washington has an anti-Muslim agenda. As Surin Pitsuwan, the former foreign minister of Thailand, puts it, a strong sense of "primordial" resentment exists among "all Muslims around the world, particularly here in Southeast Asia," rooted in the belief that their sentiments about Jerusalem, which after Mecca and Medina is the third-holiest site in Islam, "have never been seriously accommodated" by Washington.²⁷

Muslims also view Washington's Iraq invasion as reflective of "an increasingly violent culture" and its policies in Iraq and Iran "as a prelude to the fourth World War."²⁸ The invasion of Iraq demonstrably softened popular support for the war on terrorism and inflamed Muslim anger in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia alone, for example, the favorability ratings for the United States fell from 61 percent to 15 percent according to a survey in June 2003.²⁹ When President George W. Bush visited Indonesia in October 2003, Muslim clerics told him that U.S. foreign policy and the perception that most Americans consider Muslims as terrorists have been harmful to the global Muslim community and was one of the root causes of terrorist attacks targeting U.S. interests.³⁰ Consequently,

governments in the region found it difficult to engage in an overt security partnership with the United States out of fear of domestic criticism.

Against this backdrop, branding Southeast Asia as a second front in the global war on terrorism is counterproductive for Washington for several reasons. First, it implies a conceptual and operational link between Southeast Asia and the Middle East, a link that even pro-Western elites in Southeast Asia disavow. There is little acceptance among these elite of the Bush administration's claim that the war in Iraq is to be regarded as an integral part of the global war on terrorism. They see the Iraq war as having diverted Washington's attention and resources from fighting terrorism elsewhere while rendering Iraq as a new epicenter of global terrorism and possibly helping China's efforts to expand its influence in the region through its "charm offensive."

Second, there is a widespread view in the region that, for historical and cultural reasons, Southeast Asian Islam is more moderate than Islam in the Middle East. Reasons for this differentiation include the role of India as an intermediate point in the initial transmission of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula to Southeast Asia and the plural, multireligious, and multicivilizational character of Southeast Asian states and societies. Although some would view the claim to distinctiveness of Southeast Asian Islam as a cliché, a good section of the Southeast Asian intelligentsia likely finds comfort in this distinction, which would be lost if Southeast Asia is to be simply regarded as the second front in the war on terrorism.

Third, labeling Southeast Asia as a second front enables radical elements in the region to project the U.S.-led war on terrorism as a pretext for Washington to entrench its military supremacy globally and regionally while asserting its narrow economic and strategic interests at the expense of regional security and welfare. This in turn aggravates anti-American sentiments in the region and creates further difficulty in developing counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and the region's states.

Since the days of the Cold War, U.S. engagement in the region has been conducted mostly through bilateral arrangements, and these bilateral approaches have not always been smooth. In the Philippines, the United States could not engage in direct military combat against ASG because of constitutional impediments and strong domestic reactions.³¹ Local Muslims perceive that the presence of U.S. soldiers in Mindanao opens old wounds dating back to U.S. colonization and the Moro wars in the early 1990s between the United States and Muslim Moros in southern Philippine islands. There is also uncertainty about a possible U.S. role in Philippine counterterrorism activities if the negotiations with MILF break down and hostilities resume. Given that Moro insurgency has primarily been set in the context of an ethno-nationalist conflict, rather than as an Islamist terrorist movement, Washington's involve-

ment in a Philippine military offensive against the MILF could not be viewed in similar terms as its campaign against the ASG.

The United States has intensified its engagement with Indonesia after 2001, particularly following the Bali bombings. Bush's visit to the country in October 2003 and his open-ended discussion with the community, along with commitment for assistance and cooperation in the fields of defense and education, have laid the foundation to improve perceptions about the United States in Indonesia. The greater willingness on the part of Indonesia to work with the United States, however, does not signal greater latitude for U.S. actions, particularly for counterterrorism. The resumption of U.S. support to the Indonesian military did not lead to an agreement with Jakarta. This was because of the perceived double standards arising from the U.S. demand for the effective prosecution of JI leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir while Washington defied an Indonesian request for access to Hambali, the operational commander of JI and a key al Qaeda leader.

Washington's contribution in relief and rehabilitation efforts in Aceh during the 2004 tsunami disaster went some way in repairing its image in Indonesia, especially among Muslims. In fact, largely as a result of the tsunami aid effort, positive opinions of the United States in Indonesia rebounded to 38 percent in May 2006 from the 15 percent reported in 2003.³² Yet, radical groups have marketed Washington's assistance as interference in Indonesia's domestic affairs. Washington should nonetheless build on its now cordial relations with Jakarta and continue to provide assistance for the myriad problems that Indonesia faces as a developing country making a painful transition to democracy.³³ If handled properly, Indonesia can become a model for other Islamic countries by demonstrating that democracy and Islam are not necessarily incompatible. Instead of narrowly conceived counterterrorism cooperation, a better way of engagement would be to help Jakarta with development and governance assistance to strengthen its organic capacity to deal with its internal problems, including threats from terrorism.

In Thailand, it would be in the United States' interest to keep as low a profile as possible, recognizing that the situation in southern Thailand is primarily a domestic insurgency at present. Washington's increased visibility in Thailand could provide a platform for the insurgents to denounce Bangkok as a puppet conditioned by a U.S. agenda. This charge has the potential to radicalize the community and convert sympathizers into active participants in extremist violence.

Washington's involvement in Southeast Asia's war on terror faces acute political barriers.

In the Philippines, recent experience shows that, by engaging in community development projects instead of direct military operations, the United States has managed not only to shore up its popularity ratings but also undermine the influence of militant groups, especially the ASG, among the local inhabitants.

**Branding
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counterproductive
for Washington.**

The Balikatan operation in Sulu demonstrates how civil outreach and humanitarian work by the military could change the perceptions not only of locals but also of the larger Muslim community. As one U.S. Special Forces officer put it, "We changed the way we were perceived.... When we arrived in Basilan, Muslim kids made throat-slashing gestures at us. By the time we left, they were our friends."³⁴

Notwithstanding their sensitivity about the U.S. role in regional counterterrorism efforts, ASEAN members such as Malaysia and Indonesia have been receptive to U.S. assistance that does not involve direct U.S. military engagement. After Malaysia's initial misgivings about the RMSI, which it saw as a pretext for U.S. enforcement operations in Southeast Asian waters, it expanded cooperation with the United States and others to acquire and share intelligence.³⁵ Kuala Lumpur's readiness to work with the United States was reiterated with the renewal of a defense agreement with Washington in May 2005.³⁶ Similarly, Indonesia has held joint exercises with U.S. Navy Seals practicing antiterrorism drills, including boarding ships and battling pirates.³⁷

Targeting Causes, Not Symptoms

The nations of Southeast Asia have made major strides in integration and cooperation through forums such as ASEAN and the APEC group. Terrorism, however, is not an issue on which they can easily cooperate, considering the myriad differences between them in terrorist presence, threat perception, domestic politics, and public opinion. U.S. counterterrorism policy in Southeast Asia has encountered fewer problems compared to the Middle East, where the Iraq war and the failure to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict are major aggravating factors that are absent in Southeast Asia. Within Southeast Asia, Washington should pursue low-key and country-specific policies that appreciate these complexities.

Washington's long-term strategic interest in Southeast Asia is best served by helping the countries in the region in their attempts to deal with the underlying causes of conflicts, including poverty and underdevelopment. Initiatives such as tsunami aid in Aceh and community development assistance to

the Philippines could allow Washington to demonstrate that it is using its economic wealth and military capability to ameliorate the suffering of Muslims, contrary to the rhetoric of the radicals. Moreover, a low-key and advisory role in counterterrorism operations would demonstrate its respect for the sovereignty of partner states.

Notes

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