

The international nature of America's War on Terrorism illustrates how interconnected we all are in this growing age of globalization. In the sub-feature to this issue of HAPR, we have decided to approach the post-September 11th world by taking a peak at the view from Asia. South Asia, of course, has been in the fore of the war effort, but Asia is also home to Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation in the world, and North Korea, which has been called a member of an "axis of evil." What is the potential for terrorist activities in the Asian region? How do people in Asia perceive the conflict in Afghanistan? We will briefly examine these questions.

TERRORISM IN ASIA



CONFRONTING AN EMERGING CHALLENGE BY PAUL J SMITH

The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and do not reflect the policy or position of the United States Government or the US Department of Defense.

On December 13th 2001, a five-man suicide squad stormed the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in one of the most daring terrorist attacks in India's recent history. With an array of weaponry in hand—including RDX (a military explosive) and AK-47 automatic rifles and bombs—the attackers rushed inside the building, tossing grenades and gunning down anyone who opposed them. At least one of the attackers had explosives strapped to his body. Fortunately for India, the attackers did not succeed in carrying out their ultimate objective, which was to massacre as many Parliamentarians as possible, including possibly India's Prime Minister. However, the attackers did manage to kill more than six Delhi police personnel, including a female constable.

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India responded immediately and indignantly to the attack. Indian Home Minister L. K. Advani told reporters that the terrorist attack “was not an attack only on the building but at the very heart of our governance and symbol of democracy.” By December 19th, Indian and Pakistani troops were exchanging gunfire across their mutual border. India immediately demanded that Pakistan arrest the militants involved and put an end to funding terror groups operating within or around Kashmir. Indian authorities identified two groups specifically, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, that it connected with the attacks.

When India perceived that Pakistan had not adequately acceded to its demands, Delhi put its military on a war-footing.



The Indian Parliament was attacked earlier this year.

On December 25th, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared that India and Pakistan were moving closer to war. Pakistan responded that it was prepared for any eventuality, which in turn prompted Vajpayee to declare that India was prepared to go all out—including a nuclear conflict. The cumulative result was that South Asia faced one of its most tense crises ever, tinged by the threat of nuclear confrontation between two major powers.

The sudden escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan occurred in the milieu of the United States’ “war on terror” initiated after the September 11th terrorist attacks within the United States. Quite naturally, Indian political leaders were quick to draw parallels between the attack in New Delhi and the ones in New York City and Washington DC on September 11, 2001. Additionally, India tied a subsequent attack in Calcutta in January 2002—which was apparently aimed at local police officers—to Al-Qaeda and key individuals that took part in the September 11th attacks. But many analysts considered the United States’ role, particularly in Pakistan, a country viewed as critical for the American war effort, to be one of stabilizer. Washington pressured both Islamabad and Delhi to avoid conflict if for no other reason than to avoid disrupting American military efforts in Afghanistan.

But as war drums continued to beat, attention was diverted from the larger strategic question: the emerging role of terrorism as a critical security challenge in Asia—both South and East—and its ability to alter geo-strategic realities. Terrorism is not new to Asia, of course, but its growing virulence and connections to transnational organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, suggest a new type of threat. The United States, in its anti-terrorist war rhetoric, continues to mention Asia as a key battleground in this on-going struggle. This should not come as a surprise since current evidence suggests a strategic shift of terrorism from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia.

As Asian states confront rising economic and social disparities, combined with latent religious conflict, they are witnessing an increase in terrorism and terrorist attacks—some of it foisted upon the region by exogenous groups from Central Asia and the Middle East. Fueling terrorism’s growth, moreover, is a catalogue of “facilitating factors” such as transnational crime—human smuggling, passport fraud, narcotics trafficking, and money laundering—that provides the foundation upon which terrorists and their infrastructures are able to flourish.

Terrorism in Asia: Assessing the Threat

Terrorism can be defined as “a form of psychological warfare that is used to create extreme fear through the use of threat of force against non-combatant civilian military targets.” Terrorism is as much about psychological maiming as it is about physical destruction. Terrorists seek to be noticed and the mass media are often there to oblige them. Attack-

ing a country’s embassy, an airliner, or a major commercial target provides the terrorists with the advertising that they covet. As one analyst has noted, “advertising not only demonstrates the existence of a group but also serves as a reminder of its political agenda.”

Until fairly recently, terrorism has generally been associated with the Middle East, and perhaps to a lesser degree Western Europe or North America. Increasingly, however, it is Asia that is taking center stage in the world of international terrorism. A cursory review of the region might provide a logical basis for this trend. Many Asian countries are religiously pluralistic and, despite ethnic conflict being held in abeyance by authoritarian governance, economic prosperity or simply an embedded tradition of cultural tolerance, such tensions flare up during times of economic crisis or social tension. In South Asia, the festering and unresolved Kashmir issue sows the seeds of regional and transnational terrorism. Many of Southeast Asia’s latent ethnic conflicts were exposed as a result of the 1997 financial crisis. In Indonesia, for instance, a sudden wave of economic insecurity unleashed a massive wave of ethnic discord—much of it directed against ethnic Chinese citizens—that later transmuted into a campaign against Christians and foreigners.

In addition to ethnic, religious and political fissures driving the rise of terrorism, the spread of transnational crime and other forms of lawlessness also facilitate its spread. In an era of non-state funded terrorism, many groups find that they must survive by engaging in narcotics trafficking or other lucrative criminal activities. Asia provides a rich and fertile territory for such activities. Bangkok, Thailand is a virtual emporium of fake passports and other identity papers, as well as a major gathering place for nearly all global criminal organizations—ranging from Russian mafia groups to Chinese snakeheads. Narcotics trafficking is rife throughout Asia and provides a source of funding for terror groups. Moreover, the region's fast and loose banking sectors—particularly in countries like the Philippines or in numerous South Pacific states, such as Nauru—provide the critical financial base for terrorist organizations.

The abundance of small arms and other weapons in Southeast Asia also fuels terrorism movements throughout the region. Pakistan, China and North Korea are among the key arms supplier states to both criminal and terrorist organizations. North Korea reportedly sells arms to the LTTE (Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers) and other groups by first funneling them through Thailand. Two years ago, Thai officials were embarrassed by the discovery of an LTTE arms procurement cell based in Phuket; Thai officials uncovered an array of sophisticated sonar and global positioning system (GPS) equipment, satellite telephones and other battlefield equipment, including a mini-submarine. South Asia has similarly become saturated with small arms. As one analyst has noted “the Afghanistan-Pakistan region . . . contains what is possibly the largest concentration of weaponry anywhere in the world that has not been produced by itself.” More than seven million AK-47 assault weapons are “on the loose in South Asia” according to one estimate.

Overall weakened governance and widespread corruption are transforming the Asian region into a safe haven for not only terrorist organizations and cells, but also transnational crime groups that can assist terrorist groups. The 1997 economic crisis has arguably made conditions worse, especially in regions where economic resurgence has yet to appear. Political instability also



Temple of the Tooth Bombing, Kandy, Sri Lanka, January 25th 2002.

Singapore Sling and the SE Asia Terrorism Connection

In December 2001, officials from Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) arrested fifteen members of a group that were planning to bomb the US Embassy and other critical commercial, military and political targets within Singapore. Authorities would later discover that the conspirators were part of a group known as *Jemaah Islamiyah*, which had known ties to Al-Qaeda and various Islamic groups throughout Malaysia, Indo-

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contributes to the problem as governments struggle to muster resources to counter transnational threats. Moreover, the region is replete with borders that exist on maps, but have very little importance or relevance on the ground. Porous borders and the sanctuaries to which they give access provide yet another incentive for terrorist groups—both from the region and outside.

nesia and the Philippines. Although ISD officials made the arrests in December 2001, they waited until the next month before publicizing the incident in order to disrupt the entire network and to provide investigative opportunities for foreign intelligence agencies. When the arrests were finally announced on January 11th, 2002, they created a sensation throughout the

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Forceful intent behind a costume of terror.

island state, and the government responded by reassuring the public that all was under control.

Singapore authorities later announced a connection between the *Jemaah Islamiyah* and the Philippines-based Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a connection that was confirmed by subsequent arrests by Philippine authorities. The Singapore operation clearly fits the Al-Qaeda model—facilitating, funding, or encouraging terrorist actions by preexisting affiliated indigenous groups within the target country. In this case, Al-Qaeda had relied upon a cell comprised mainly of Singapore nationals. Six of the accused had completed their service in the Singapore Armed Forces. All of them had studied in Singapore schools, and eight of the accused had traveled to Afghanistan to be trained in camps run by Al-Qaeda.

As a result of the discovery of the Singapore plot, investigators and officials

were wondering if Al-Qaeda had set up a viable network throughout the region. On January 21st, evidence of just such network came to light as authorities in the Philippines announced that they had arrested thirty year-old Fathur Rohman Al-Ghozi, an Indonesian national and the alleged bomb maker and a key planner in the Singapore bomb plot. Al-Ghozi and three other Philippine accomplices had attempted to transfer a metric ton of explosives into Singapore in preparation for the attack. Following his arrest and subsequent interrogation, Al-Ghozi led authorities to an arms cache belonging to *Jemaah Islamiyah* located in the Mindanao city of General Santos. Under interrogation, Al-Ghozi admitted that he had provided munitions and financing for an attack on a Manila train that had killed more than twenty-two people in December 2000. Authorities suspect that *Jemaah Islamiyah* may have been behind several

other terrorist attacks in recent years, including bombings and assassination attempts in Indonesia and the Philippines. But the Al-Ghozi arrest also established clear linkages—even to the point of operational cooperation—between *Jemaah Islamiyah* and the Philippine-based Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

If the Singapore bomb plot proved anything, it was that the possibility of terrorist networks existing throughout Southeast Asia could no longer be dismissed. With their porous borders and numerous unmonitored islands, countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia have found themselves to be particularly vulnerable to the influx of exogenous radical groups with transnational linkages and financial support. American officials, such as US Pacific Command chief Admiral Dennis Blair, have warned several Southeast Asian countries that they could face an influx of Al-Qaeda—

or similar terrorist groups—as a result of military operations in Afghanistan. One particularly vulnerable country is the Philippines, which has been battling at least two terrorist groups with Al-Qaeda links: the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the above-mentioned MILF.

Shortly after the September 11th attacks in the United States, US officials publicly speculated that the battle against terrorism would likely spread to Southeast Asia and the one group named as directly linked to Al-Qaeda was the Philippines-based group known as Abu Sayyaf. Abu Sayyaf's linkage to Al-Qaeda derives directly from the fact that one of Abu Sayyaf's founders, Mohammad Jamal Khalifah, is Osama Bin Laden's brother-in-law. For more than ten years, the Philippines central government has battled Abu Sayyaf as it conducted a series of terrorist and criminal actions. In the early 1990s, the group regularly bombed churches,

shopping center and transportation hubs. In 1995, the group was linked to a larger Al-Qaeda plot, run by Ramsi Yousef, Abdul Hakim Murad and others, known as *Oplan Bojinka* which sought to not only assassinate visiting Pope John Paul II, but also to bomb at least eleven US airliners as they traveled from Asia back to the United States. One part of *Oplan Bojinka* involved commandeering a civilian US aircraft and ramming it—in a suicide mission—directly into CIA headquarters in Langley Virginia, a plot that chillingly foreshadowed the September 11th attacks in the United States.

Beginning in 2000, Abu Sayyaf initiated a spree of kidnappings involving foreign nationals, primarily with the aim of raising funds. The first major operation involved a raid in April 2000 on the Malaysian diving resort of Sipadan, in which over twenty-one Westerners and Asians were captured. A second operation involved a raid in May 2001 on a resort on the island of Palawan in which over twenty people—including three Americans—were captured. Since early 2002, Abu Sayyaf has clearly been on the defensive, as the US-directed global “war on terror” has unfolded. In early 2002, the US government dispatched more than six hundred troops to assist and train their Filipino counterparts in a campaign against Abu Sayyaf. In late February 2002, it was revealed that the United States was expanding its anti-terror war in the Philippines by expanding surveillance flights throughout the southern Philippines and by dispatching Special Forces troops on the southern island of Basilan, where the Abu Sayyaf is believed to be holding American hostages.

The Philippine government is also confronting the MILF, which seeks an independent Islamic state in Mindanao. Established in 1984, the MILF largely engages in guerilla warfare against Philippine military forces, in contrast with the Abu Sayyaf, which directs many of its activities and attacks against civilian targets. Some experts and government agencies in the Philip-

pines allege that the MILF has strong links to Al-Qaeda, evidenced by funding flows and indications that certain MILF-affiliated militants have trained in terrorist camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Certain MILF operatives are also believed to be secretly aiding the more radical Abu Sayyaf organization, and thus engaging in classic terrorist activities such as the 1995 assault on the town of Ipil—widely believed to be a joint Abu Sayyaf-MILF operation—that resulted in the murder of over fifty-three Christians. In August 2001, the MILF signed a truce

agreement with the Philippine government, but some Philippine analysts believe that the group has simply used the agreement to buy time in order to consolidate its forces and fortify its camps.

Like the Philippines, Indonesia is considered another key node in the ever complex network of Islamic terrorism. But unlike the Philippines, Indonesia probably constitutes the region's weakest link and, given its demographic sta-

ture, such status can only be viewed as ominous. Political, economic and social instability in this Southeast Asian behemoth—with a population over two-hundre twenty-eight million—has created a fertile environment for the influx of terrorist organizations. Some experts consider one of *Jemaah Islamiyah's* key leadership bases to be located in the Indonesian city of Solo, headed by a fundamentalist Islamic cleric, Abu Bakar Baasyir. Moreover, key arrests of Al-Qaeda in Spain uncovered evidence of Indonesia's role as a training ground for thousands of international terrorists. In December 2001, the head of Indonesia's intelligence agency, Abdullah Hendropriyono, confirmed that Al-Qaeda and its affiliated members had established camps in Sulawesi and had exacerbated the sectarian violence in Poso, located in central Sulawesi.

One particular group, Laskar Jihad, has been singled out as having specific contacts with Al-Qaeda and other groups within the region. Last July, Osama Bin Laden reportedly sent an emissary to the Moluccas offering financial and other support to Laskar Jihad in return for that group's pledge to join the Al-Qaeda network. In July 2001, five Al-Qaeda terrorists from Yemen arrived in Indonesia supposedly for the purpose of bombing the US Embassy. Political analysts and intelligence officials believe that Indonesia may possibly be one of the next key bases for Al-Qaeda, particularly as a result of US military actions in Afghanistan. Indonesia is viewed as a prime operating region because of its numerous islands (over seventeen thousand) and porous borders. Some parts of Indonesia, it could justifiably be argued, are only marginally under the control of Jakarta. The absence of government control creates an Afghanistan-like environment that is attractive to Al-Qaeda or its remnants. US officials are concerned that many Indonesians, who are known to have trained with the Taliban in Afghanistan, are currently unaccounted for. In 1998, an estimated fifteen hundred young Indonesian men traveled to Afghanistan to train

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with the Taliban. Of that original number, about one thousand are accounted for, while the whereabouts of the remaining five hundred are unknown and constitute “a time bomb of five hundred young people.”

Malaysia constitutes Southeast Asia’s third prong of concern with regard to rising terrorism activity. The country played a significant—albeit probably unwitting—role in the September 11th attacks in the United States when it hosted two of the hijackers who would later be involved in the attacks on the United States. A third individual, Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged 20th hijacker, was also reportedly in the country in late 2000. Malaysia has played a significant role as the host of key individuals of the recently-uncovered *Jemaah Islamiyah* organization. Although Malaysian officials have downplayed their country’s regional terrorist role, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad branded at least one group, Kumpulan Mojahedin Malaysia (KMM), as a threat to national security. It is believed that a significant number of KMM members have received training from Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Following US military actions in Afghanistan, a key political opposition party in Malaysia, Parti Islam sa-Malaysia (PAS) reportedly called on Malaysians to leave for Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban against allied forces. Reacting to the PAS’ open sympathies for the Taliban, Malaysian authorities detained seven PAS members, including the son of the party’s spiritual leader, under the country’s strict Internal Security Act (ISA).

Overall, the spread of terrorism networks through Southeast Asia poses serious political and economic challenges for the region. For one, it has elicited a US military response as part of the larger “war on terrorism.” The recent deployment of more than six hundred US troops in the Philippines probably foreshadows a more sustained and perhaps widened military campaign. The larger implications are perhaps more troubling. If Southeast Asia acquires a reputation as a “soft touch” in the global web of terror, the region could attract even more terrorist organizations, especially now that the Afghanistan safe-haven option is no longer viable. More ominous, however, would be the impact on long-term economic and social development. A region known as a terrorist haven tends to repel badly-need foreign investment and the economic growth stimulated by it.

The LTTE’s Long Tentacles Within Asia

In the early hours of July 24, 2001, Sri Lanka’s twenty year-old civil war took a dramatic and destructive turn when fourteen members of an LTTE suicide squad attacked Sri Lanka’s

Bandaranaike international airport (including an adjoining air force base) and destroyed twenty-six commercial and military aircraft. The attack, launched from a nearby storm water drain at 3:50am, exhibited detailed planning and intimate knowledge of the country’s main international airport. The attackers, all of whom wore suicide bodysuits embedded with explosives, fought for more than five hours, destroying aircraft—including two



Shields and Suppression: Regional unrest may be part of the problem.

Airbus-320s and an Airbus-340—and various airport facilities. As one analyst noted, “The suicide dimension—fourteen members targeting twenty-six aircraft—made the operation cost effective.” The intent of this LTTE attack was to cripple Sri Lanka’s economy and dis-

courage international investment and tourism.

The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) is a group fighting for an independent homeland in northern Sri Lanka. For more than twenty years, the group has launched ruthless and effective military and terrorist attacks against the country’s central bank, its army headquarters, air force headquarters, the country’s international airport, international hotels, oil refineries, port facilities, bus stations, and the prime minister’s office. Overall, more than seventy thousand people in Sri Lanka have died as a result of the clashes, not including the hundreds of thousands of individuals who have been displaced.

A distinguishing characteristic of the LTTE is its reliance on suicide bombers (for terrorist operations) and suicide attackers (in military operations). The use of suicide tactics has made the LTTE an extremely lethal force. The group also has a maritime wing known as the Sea Tigers, which also employs suicide tactics. The LTTE is not

merely a country-specific terrorist organization; it is also a transnational force with strategic reach throughout South and Southeast Asia. One of its most dramatic attacks outside of Sri Lanka was the 1991 suicide bombing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi near the southern Indian city of Madras. Most of the LTTE’s regional network is focused on acquiring weaponry and financial support. The organization has successfully tapped into the vast financial reservoir of the Tamil

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diaspora found in Western Europe, Canada and parts of Africa.

In many ways, the LTTE exemplifies the “convergence” so often discussed in security and law enforcement circles. The LTTE relies on organized crime to raise money and fake passports to achieve clandestine migration (for fundraising and to conduct strikes). The group also has been linked to the human smuggling trade and the illegal narcotics industry. In May 2000, Sri Lankan police broke up an international human smuggling operation allegedly linked to the LTTE that carried over seven hundred people a month to Europe and provided them with forged travel documents. Apart from receiving funding support from ethnic Tamil diaspora communities around the globe, the LTTE views criminal enterprises as a key means of maintaining its financial strength and organizational independence.

Most recently the LTTE has entered into a ceasefire with the Sri Lankan government. But many terrorism experts doubt that the LTTE sincerely seeks an accommodation with Colombo, particularly given the LTTE’s reluctance to give up its longstanding demand for an independent Tamil Eelam, or homeland. Currently, the LTTE needs a ceasefire to increase recruits and replenish its arms, and repair infrastructure. “The LTTE regularly uses truces and ceasefires as part of its military strategy,” noted one terrorism expert at a recent international gathering. Moreover, in the wake of the global “war on terror”, the LTTE would probably like to avoid the global wrath now being

directed against terrorist groups around the world. Only time can tell if the latest truce is lasting, or merely a cynical effort on the part of the LTTE to buy time and re-group.

Confronting The Need for Cooperation

Terrorism has clearly emerged as a key strategic challenge for Asia and, if current trends continue, this challenge is likely to grow. Terrorism threatens to derail the region’s economic growth and vitality. It threatens to diminish the quality of life of its citizens. Most ominously, it will result in horrific human carnage and mortality. Eradicating—or at least mitigating—terrorism will require tactical and strategic cooperation between states. States are, after all, the primary targets of most terrorist attacks. States can and should seek a common goal of collective self-defense.

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks in the United States, attention and collective will have arguably been directed at the terrorist challenge, perhaps on an unprecedented scale. The question remains, however, once the energy of the current anti-terror campaign fizzles, will the political will against terrorism be maintained? Governments will need to devote resources (including re-directing budgets) to combat this challenge and overcome political differences to allow mutual cooperation. Unless these actions are taken, terror will likely spread in the region. However, the first step is recognition of the problem. Denial is the enemy of security. ■