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ASEAN-US COOPERATION TO COMBAT INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: A MORE NUANCED APPROACH NEEDED

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On 1 August 2002 the United States of America and the ten member countries of ASEAN signed a Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism. The pact essentially provides a framework for cooperation to prevent, disrupt and combat international terrorism through the exchange and flow of information, intelligence and capacity-building. It commits the participants to improve counter-terrorism measures through sharing of intelligence and information on terrorist financing; developing more effective policies and legal, regulatory and administrative regimes; enhance liaison among their law enforcement agencies; strengthen capacity-building through training and education; consultations, exchanges and joint operations; and provide assistance on transportation, border and immigration controls to stem the flow of terrorist-related material, money and people.

> *The pact was signed against a backdrop of the US effort to globalise its war on terror by stitching together various "coalitions of the willing" to buttress its military action against terrorist groups and states that harbour them, as exemplified by the war against the Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Several observers have noted that the coalition which had been formed after the 9-11 attacks on the US, were only a thin veneer and in essence "most of its members were not being asked to do anything much beyond lining up behind American military action." (Tony Judt: "The War on Terror" – The New York Review of Books 20 Dec 2001). In other words America's post 9-11 "coalition building" was in fact designed to foster a political, legal and operational climate affording it freedom of action to more effectively and efficiently expedite the unilateral exercise of American military power against Al Qaeda.*

Is the ASEAN-US pact against terrorism any different? Not really. A closer analysis of the US objectives in having such a pact suggests that to have a truly lasting effect US-ASEAN cooperation should not only be harnessed for "direct" military-security measures to disrupt and destroy terrorist cells but must also embrace "indirect" means to alleviate the

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root causes of terrorism itself.

US objectives

The US posture of a military-oriented unilateralism was evident in the joint "training" operations that American armed forces carried out with Philippines security forces for six months earlier this year. Some 1,300 Special Forces troops were deployed in the Southern Philippines for joint military exercises with Filipino forces in island-hideouts of the Abu Sayyaf bandits. Additional "advisors" are to be posted to train Filipino troops for continuing counter-insurgency operations. The US would also provide US$50 million in aid to the Indonesian police and military to enhance their counter-terrorism capacity.

The pact with ASEAN fits into and serves to support the US' direct strategy framework, i.e., the increased intelligence flow culled from ASEAN sources would be centralized within the US Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu, where future military strikes against terrorist cells in Southeast Asia would be planned. In addition, imposing tighter immigration controls would directly address the operational vulnerability of porous Southeast Asian borders. The new measures to exchange intelligence and information on terrorist funds flows should disrupt regional lines of communication of terrorist groups and isolate the terrorist cells from one another. The US planners no doubt expect that this disruption of terrorist links would "flush" out terrorist operatives from their hiding places because they would need to construct new logistical and financial channels; at which point the coalition security forces would arrest or attack them. That might seem to be a sound military-operational strategy. However whether it would be effective or sufficient to neutralize the Al Qaeda threat in Southeast remains to be seen.

A more nuanced approach needed

The US has legitimate reason to be anxious about the possibility of another Al Qaeda terrorist strike on American targets at home or abroad. However it has to recognise that a direct strategy emphasizing a military-security operational approach might deal with short-term threats or branches of the tree of terror but not address the roots of the problem. Osama bin Laden and his ideological acolytes are able to count on the willing support of sympathisers for their terror plans. If they were deprived of such a committed following they would be paralysed and wither. A more nuanced approach is required combining short-term military-operational measures with longer-term strategies to alleviate the conditions that breed resentment and fuel radical movements, Islamic or ideological. (The US decision to include the communist New People's Army of the Philippines in the list of terrorist groups reflects a belated recognition of its potential threat.)

ASEAN governments should seek to persuade the US to nuance its counter- terror strategy in Southeast Asia and indeed around the world, in at least three ways: by promoting good governance; encouraging reform in Islamic education; and enhancing public diplomacy based on sound policy towards the Muslim world. First, the US (and the West) should invest more resources in helping key Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Philippines to improve governance. This must involve more than funding counter-terrorism training programmes to augment the organic capacity of Jakarta and Manila respectively to identify, monitor, detain or eliminate terrorists, important though that may be. The US (and the West) must also help these governments enhance their capacities to promote greater official accountability, e.g., in the way their armed forces deal with their people, and equally

important, socio-economic development.

Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population in the world, is still suffering the after-effects of the 1998 Asian financial and economic crisis and "rising poverty, lawlessness, fuelled by economic stagnation and political infighting" have begun to compel increasing numbers of ordinary Indonesians to "view radical Islam as a panacea." The problem of poor governance also afflicts the Philippines, where a massive 40% of the people live on less than one dollar a day and according to a World Bank study, over the past decade a sharp decline in standards of education, health and basic services have "driven more and more Filipinos to join rebel movements."

The pressing need to promote educational reform has been underlined by leaders of the two key Muslim countries in Southeast Asia. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, for instance, has argued that "it is not Islam which obstructs our progress…(but) the wrong and rigid interpretations which we are taught which hinder progress." Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, still a leading Islamic intellectual, said that young Muslims needed to approach their faith with the "intellectual sophistication" demanded by a globalized world; otherwise they would be vulnerable to the "formalistic understanding of Islamic law" that bred a "violent radicalism". He said more young Muslims should undertake "liberal arts courses in western universities." In this regard more foreign aid programmes could be launched to help governments expand the number of secular schools, thereby obviating the demand for certain religious schools "that are little more than terror training colleges."

Third, the US needs to enhance its public diplomacy, based on sound policy towards the Muslim world. Many Muslims have the perception that the Islamic community "has fallen behind in economic development, education, science and democratisation" because of a worldwide Jewish-American conspiracy to keep Muslims downtrodden. They believe that "America is against Islam" because the US is backing Israel, "and the enmity between Islam and Israel" was obvious. There is an imperative need to publicize more effectively the ways in which the US has helped oppressed Muslims in Kuwait, Bosnia and Kosovo and more recently, Afghanistan (to free them from Taliban/Al Qaeda oppression)

US and western expertise in public diplomacy should also be enlisted in aid of moderate Muslim leaders in Southeast Asia, not by getting involved in the debate between moderate and extremist Islamic groups, but by providing technological and educational assistance to the moderate schools to enable them to counter radical Islamic propaganda, which is powerful because it excels in "presenting a simple yet comprehensive ideology that can be grasped by common people." Ultimately the efficacy of public diplomacy is contingent upon having a sound policy – if the US is perceived by Southeast Asian Muslims to be more keen on attacking Iraq than in seeking a just resolution of the Palestinian conflict, and if American commanders continue to employ warfare tactics that cause the "collateral" deaths of innocent Muslims in Afghanistan and potentially Iraq, no amount of rhetoric or smooth publicity is going to persuade Muslims of America's benign intentions.

If the United States wants to win the war on terror in Southeast Asia – and elsewhere – it must take care to nuance its counter-terrorism cooperation with ASEAN so as to strike a judicious balance between "direct" military-operational measures and more "indirect" political, socio-economic and ideological methods to address the root causes of terrorism.