RSIS COMMENTARIES

Asian Threat Forecast 2010

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Terrorism and insurgency will remain the tier-one national security threat worldwide in 2010. To reduce the global threat, governments will have to enhance collaboration and build robust community engagement programmes and reach out to their Muslim communities.

WHILE THE insurgent threat in Asia, Middle East, and Africa will persist, the terrorist threat in the migrant and Diaspora communities of the West is likely to grow and spread. With the strengthening of existing groups and formation of new ones, Afghanistan- Pakistan in Asia, Iraq and Yemen in the Middle East, and Somalia in Africa have emerged as the most enduring conflict zones. North America and Europe are likely to suffer intermittent attacks both from group and homegrown terrorism.

Al Qaeda Factor

Heightened violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan has made South Asia the epicentre of international terrorism. While the Asia- Pacific is economically the world's fastest growing region, South Asia is suffering from terrorism and ideological extremism. The insurgent and terrorist threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to continue and even grow in 2010 and spill over to neighbouring countries. Operating out of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) located on the Afghanistan and Pakistan border, Al Qaeda-directed, co-directed and inspired cells present a transnational threat that must be countered.

The year 2010 is likely to witness increased military pressure both on the Taliban and Al Qaeda by the coalition-supported Afghan forces and the US-supported Pakistani forces. Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda-trained operatives are likely to expand into multiple conflict zones, increasing the threat in Xinjiang in Western China, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen. Large scale human rights violations in these conflict zones, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, have increased Muslim support and sympathy for Al Qaeda and its associated groups. On a global scale, guerilla warfare and terrorism in Asia-Pacific has surpassed the violence in the Middle East. While Latin America is the least affected, Africa, both north and east, is emerging as the most violent region.

South Asia

Al Qaeda and both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are working with a dozen other groups that threaten both regional and global peace. Al Qaeda and its associated groups continue to provide training and ideological inspiration to groups in Pakistan and beyond. Increasingly, Lashkar-e-Toiba leaders, members and followers are coming under the influence of Al Qaeda. In India, homegrown cells and groups assisted by Pakistan militant jihadi outfits present a growing threat.

Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion and its Directorate General of Forces Intelligence have appreciably reduced the threat by neutralising several local and foreign terrorist cells. However, as there is no sustained programme to engage the Muslim community and rehabilitate the terrorists in custody, the threat of terrorism and extremism persists in Bangladesh. With Maldivians joining Al Qaeda, including a suicide attack by a Maldivian in Pakistan, the threat to the Maldives is growing.

Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, the threat has been dramatically reduced with the decapitation and arrest of key Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leaders. Although several other groups are emerging in Indonesia, Detachment 88 -- Indonesia's elite counter terrorism organization -- is capable of managing the operational threat. Nonetheless, with the failure of Indonesia to develop effective counter ideological programmes in community engagement and terrorist rehabilitation, the threat in Indonesia is likely to persist. It is absolutely necessary to proscribe JI and retry the JI leadership responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings and other attacks in Indonesia.

In the Southern Philippines and Southern Thailand, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and a few ethno-nationalist Muslim groups continue to fight their respective governments. While it is paramount for the Philippine government to revive the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), United States and Australian collaboration is essential to dismantle the Al Qaeda-linked ASG. Thailand is likely to remain the most violent conflict zone in Southeast Asia.

Northeast Asia

In the Asia-Pacific, the most stable sub-region is Northeast Asia. Except in Xingjiang where the Al Qaeda-linked Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is based, there are no threat groups in Northeast Asia. After the Urumqi riots in July 2009, polarisation of the Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese increased ETIM's support base. The Al Qaeda- linked ETIM's capacity to operate in Xingjiang and elsewhere in China and Hong Kong has grown. By and large, the Central Asian region has remained stable and is likely to remain so. Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan however face a higher level of terrorist threat than other countries in the region.

Central Asia

Although the operational threat has been contained in Uzbekistan, the ideological penetration and the threat of Hizb-ut Tahrir and its violent splinter, Al Akramia, continue to grow. The lack of understanding of the West in the ideological dimension of these groups has created an opportunity for these groups to survive and revive. The situation in Kirgizstan, a nation that lacks the capacity to fight, is the most serious. Tajikistan and other Central Asian states have managed threats from terrorism well. Nonetheless, ideological extremism continues to politicise and radicalise a new generation of recruits for the local and global fight.

Need to Reach Out to the Muslim Community

Some countries have proactively managed their threats and others are reacting to threats. Most

governments have built their operational capabilities to respond to terrorism but not to prevent ideological extremism causing radicalisation. To fight terrorism effectively, governments must invest in a multi-pronged response, especially working with Muslim youth.

Today, almost all the Muslim countries face the threat from extremist or terrorist groups. On the operational spectrum, the counter terrorism tactical forces and security and intelligence services in Asia continue to receive guidance and work with their more experienced counterparts from the US, UK, and Australia. On the ideological spectrum, some governments have developed strategic capabilities to reach out to their Muslim communities. As the threat continues to expand, it is paramount for governments to work closely with the Muslim community leaders to help their communities from the ideological penetration of Al Qaeda and its associated groups in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

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