

“The Southeast Asian Approach” to Counter-Terrorism: Learning from Indonesia and Malaysia

by
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ABSTRACT

US counter-terror doctrine appears to assume that undermining Islamist terror networks such as al-Qaeda and its Southeast Asian affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah requires increasing state capacities and promoting intelligence cooperation to eliminate terror cells and their logistics lines within Southeast Asia, while promoting good governance to ensure that terror networks do not transform failed state environments into sanctuaries. This article argues that while such a real-time, short-term counter-terrorist strategy is certainly important, it needs to be complemented by a longer-term approach designed to neuter the ability of terror networks to regenerate. This is why a counter-terrorism strategy designed to eradicate as far as possible the ideological and political sources of Muslim discontent is just as vital. Rejecting “top-down,” one-size-fits-all approaches formulated in Washington, the article articulates a “bottom-up” Southeast Asian indirect strategy to combat Islamist terror within the region. It shows how certain aspects of the Malaysian and Indonesian experiences respectively may offer clues as to how such a Southeast Asian indirect strategy, encompassing a mix of counter-terrorism and counter-terrorist elements in which the former play a central role, may be formulated.

INTRODUCTION

More than two and a half years following the terrorist attacks on two packed nightclubs on the Indonesian island resort of Bali on 12 October 2002, Southeast Asia – home to 230 million Muslims – remains a very important front in the global war on terror. Straddling the maritime core of Southeast Asia is Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country, within whose borders an ideological battle is going on to shape the trajectory of the Islamic faith. That contest may have huge implications for the future of Islam worldwide. Moreover,

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because the Malacca and Lombok Straits are waterways through which much of Northeast Asian energy flows, an “Islamic revolution in Indonesia” that brings the radicals to power would have “devastating consequences for the global economy.”¹ The problem of neutralizing the challenge of militant Islam and its virulent offshoot – terrorism – in Southeast Asia is, therefore, not at all academic. Little wonder that the United States, the chief adversary of the *al-Qaeda* Islamist terror network that perpetrated the 11 September 2001 attacks, has refocused strategic attention on Southeast Asia. As this article will show, the prevailing orthodoxy in counter-terror doctrine, certainly as espoused in certain official Washington circles, holds that inflicting a mortal blow on Islamist terror networks, such as *al-Qaeda* and its Southeast Asian affiliate *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), requires increasing state capacities and promoting intelligence cooperation to identify and eliminate terror cells and their logistics lines within the region. At the same time the US wishes to promote good governance to ensure that terror networks do not transform failed state environments into sanctuaries.

This article argues that while such a real-time, short-term counter-terrorist strategy is certainly important, it needs to be supplemented and indeed complemented by a longer-term approach designed to neuter the ability of terror networks to regenerate. This is why a counter-terrorism strategy designed to eradicate as far as possible the ideological and political sources of Muslim discontent is just as vital. Rejecting “top-down,” abstract, one-size-fits-all counter-terrorist strategies formulated in Washington, this article calls for a “bottom-up” Southeast Asian *indirect* strategy to combat Islamist terror within the region. It focuses attention on certain aspects of the Malaysian and Indonesian experiences that could suggest how to formulate a Southeast Asian indirect strategy, encompassing a mix of counter-terrorism and counter-terrorist elements, in which the former play a central role. To this end the article is divided into the following sections. First, it examines the so-called US “4D Strategy” that was promulgated in February 2003, showing the ways in which it essentially conforms to what we have called a counter-terrorist model. Second, it shows that while Washington and its ASEAN allies have sought to apply a counter-terrorist approach in Southeast Asia and have attained some successes, these have merely been tactical and not strategic. That is, they have not actually targeted the regeneration capacity of Islamist terror networks. Third, the article shows that Islamist networks are able to regenerate because the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and US foreign policy more generally, inadvertently help them to do so. Fourth, it examines why a counter-terrorist oriented *direct* strategy is less able conceptually to deal with the ideologically and politically driven terror threat in Southeast Asia and that an indirect strategy built around a strong counter-terrorism core is likely to be more effective. Finally, the article fleshes out such a Southeast Asian indirect strategy by exploiting Malaysia’s successful but woefully neglected counterinsurgency experience as well as Indonesia’s progressive Islamic scholarship.

THE US NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM

The United States National Security Strategy (NSS), released in September 2002, represents an attempt by the Bush administration to move beyond merely pre-empting terrorist organizations and rogue states before they attack the US. It casts a far wider net, seeking to address issues, such as “the stability of the Middle East,” “oil,” as well as “the role of the United Nations and the position of the United States in the 21st century.”² The key thread running through the NSS is that ultimately, democratic reform, especially in the long-simmering Middle East, remains the ultimate solution to the problem of terrorism.³ More than that, however, the NSS reveals the determination of the Bush administration to employ the full instrumentalities of American power to promote democratization. In this vein Charles Knight argues that the document “reflects a Hobbesian assumption that ‘might makes right’ wrapped in a sort of right-wing idealism about forcefully leading the world toward the rewards of freedom.”⁴ Paul Kennedy, for his part, believes that the NSS in particular and the Bush administration in general has been displaying an “odd combination of Wilsonian idealism and Reaganite muscularity.”⁵ The NSS, in short, shows that Washington seeks to insure against future 11 September-type attacks by fashioning, by force if necessary, a liberal global order underpinned by American military power.⁶ Five months after the release of the NSS the more narrowly focused US National Strategy for Countering Terrorism (NSCT) was announced. A follow-up document operationalizing elements of the NSS, the NSCT reveals fully the “muscular Wilsonianism” of the Bush White House. It declares in no uncertain terms that the aim of the NSCT is to “stop terrorist attacks against the United States, its interests,” and US “friends and allies around the world.” The ultimate aim is to “create an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and all those who support them.”⁷

To this end, the NSCT identifies a so-called “4D strategy.” First, the US and its allies will “*defeat* terrorist organizations of global reach by attacking their sanctuaries; leadership; command, control and communications; material support; and finances.” Second, they will “*deny* further sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists by ensuring other states accept their responsibilities to take action against these international threats within their sovereign territory.”⁸ In this respect the NSCT identifies four categories of states: “willing and able,” “weak but willing,” “reluctant,” and “unwilling.”⁹ The document asserts that while Washington would work with and assist the first two categories of partners in their fight against terrorism, it would “convince” reluctant partners to “change course and meet their international obligations.”¹⁰ In the case of “unwilling states,” the document warns that America would “act decisively to counter the threat they pose and ultimately, to compel them to cease supporting terrorism.”¹¹ Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in March 2003 showed clearly that the Bush White House is extremely serious in seeking to effect NSCT aims and objectives.

A third “D” the NSCT identifies is the need for the US to *defend* the American homeland and its citizens and interests abroad through improving homeland security, better intelligence sharing, as well as enhanced protection of critical physical and information-based infrastructure at home and overseas.¹²

Of greater significance as far as this article is concerned, however, is the fourth and final “D”: the NSCT observes that Washington will seek to “*diminish* the underlying conditions” that terrorists seek to exploit.¹³ The NSCT identifies two chief ways in which Washington will attempt to achieve this aim. First, America will work with the international community to strengthen weak and failed states. Targeted aid aimed at improving governance, economic welfare, the rule of law, and respect for human rights would perhaps prevent some states from becoming terrorist safe havens. In addition, Washington, in tandem with its allies, will “wage a war of ideas” so as to delegitimize terrorism, undercut extremist ideologies, and importantly, work towards a “just and comprehensive settlement” of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹⁴ While the importance of “diminishing underlying conditions” is explicitly recognized in the new US 4D Strategy, a close analysis of the key “Goals and Objectives” section of the NSCT that elaborates on the 4D Strategy reveals that out of a total of 14 pages, less than three are devoted to an elaboration of the essentially non-coercive, non-military goal of “Diminishing the Underlying Conditions that Terrorists Seek to Exploit.”¹⁵ In other words, in essence, the preponderance of the Defeat, Deny and Defend elements of the 4D Strategy suggest that the NSCT is in essence a *direct* strategy (see below) in which operationally focused, short-term counter-terrorist elements predominate. Such a counter-terrorist focus is evident when we examine the US-led war on terror in Southeast Asia thus far.

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN THEATRE

The ASEAN states are still grappling with long-term bilateral tensions and suspicions.¹⁶ Some analysts even assert that despite appearances of ASEAN amity, there has been in fact a “disturbing picture of non-cooperation between ASEAN intelligence services.”¹⁷ While ASEAN cooperation has always been constrained to an extent by the adherence of member-states to the principle of national sovereignty, ASEAN states have certainly seen the value of cooperating in the war on terror. All governments fully understand that combating terrorism is a priority not only because of the physical threat to lives and property it poses. ASEAN governments know that if they take, or are seen to be taking, little action against the scourge of terrorism, they will lose out in the wider strategic economic contest with Northeast Asia, especially China, in the competition for export markets and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).¹⁸ Furthermore it is not at all lost upon regional governments that, in seeking to set up a pan-Southeast Asian Islamic superstate, JI is directly challenging the national identities and territorial integrities of relatively young nation-states.¹⁹ Hence, one fact must be underscored: ASEAN governments want to deal decisively with the threat of JI.

That ASEAN cooperation at the sub-regional level against JI is real and sustained has been evidenced by close intelligence and police cooperation that has resulted in the capture of key militants: for example, Indonesian JI explosives expert Fathur Rohman Al-Ghozi in Manila in early 2002; Singapore JI leader Mas Selamat Kastari in the Indonesian Riau islands in February 2003; and Arifin Ali, of the Singapore JI again, in Thailand in May 2003. It should also be recognized that while the Thai police – with the help of the CIA – captured the JI operational chief, Hambali, in August 2003, along with two Malaysians of a cell he had set up, Malaysian police captured the two other members of Hambali's cell. The cell had been established at the behest of now-detained *al-Qaeda* operational commander Khalid Sheikh Mohammad in order to hijack an aircraft.²⁰ It might be added, moreover, that the Singaporean and Malaysian governments willingly provided video testimony of Singaporean and Malaysian JI members during the trial in Indonesia of alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir. In addition, in May 2002, an Anti-Terrorism Pact was signed by Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The pact seeks to neutralize terrorist threats and devise measures to tackle transnational criminal activities, such as money laundering, illegal trafficking of women and children, and piracy. In fact, the number of states acceding to the Anti-Terrorism Pact was augmented by the addition of Thailand, Cambodia, and Brunei, the latter in October 2003.²¹ In addition, periodic ASEAN declarations on terrorism, such as the Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism in November 2001 and the Declaration on Terrorism in November 2002, express a shared political commitment to combating the regional terrorist threat. For a loose association of states marked by considerable political, cultural, and historical diversity, such declarations have a powerful symbolic value that should not be too readily discounted. Hence, the Bali Concord II of October 2003 that established an ASEAN Security Community should be seen as an expression of a common ASEAN determination to work together to counter the likes of JI, in spite of occasional bilateral and other difficulties. ASEAN knows that defeating terrorism is a necessary step to the creation of a potentially lucrative ASEAN Economic Community comprising a single production base and market of 530 million people by 2020.²²

Apart from inter-state cooperation, ASEAN governments have been trying to crackdown on terrorist activities within their national boundaries. Most regional observers would agree that the state-level response has been strongest in Singapore, Malaysia, and to some extent the Philippines. Without a doubt, after the Bali attacks of October 2002, Indonesia's response has been much stronger as well.²³ In addition, since mid-2003 and especially with the arrest of Hambali, it would seem that Bangkok has been more vigorous in dealing with terrorist related activities on Thai soil – in fact, as we shall argue later, perhaps too vigorous.²⁴ However, it must be recognized that national counter-terror responses throughout Southeast Asia vary considerably. Not all Southeast Asian states have similar capacities to interdict the circulation of terrorist funds, material, and man-

power. In this connection Indonesia, the Philippines, and, to some extent, Thailand, stand out as weak states with insufficient administrative coverage over their territories, in comparison to the strong, administratively powerful states of Singapore and Malaysia. Moreover, the maritime configuration of the Southeast Asian archipelago as well as corruption and lack of professionalism among front-line immigration staff and security force personnel, expedite both the circulation of militants as well as a relatively flourishing illegal arms trade. Further complicating the picture are deeply rooted institutional rivalries between the military and the police in several states; and complicated internal political dynamics as well. Nevertheless, despite these diverse difficulties, ASEAN governments have been seeking to strengthen their respective legal and administrative counter-terror regimes. Thus Jakarta, following the Bali bombings, promulgated two emergency presidential decrees – which were subsequently passed as laws – to immediately facilitate investigations and detentions of suspected terrorists. These laws empower the police to detain suspected terrorists without trial, authorize the death penalty for certain terrorist acts, and allow intelligence reports to be used as evidence.²⁵

In a nutshell the bulk of ASEAN inter-state cooperation in the war on terror in Southeast Asia to a very large extent fits snugly with the operationally focused counter-terrorist thrust of Washington's 4D Strategy. Hence, the US-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism, initialed on 1 August 2002, committed the US and its ASEAN partners to several unambiguously counter-terrorist initiatives: continuing and improving "intelligence and terrorist financing information sharing"; developing "more effective counter-terrorism policies and legal, regulatory and administrative counter-terrorism regimes"; enhancing liaison between law enforcement agencies; strengthening "capacity-building efforts" through "training and education"; consultations between "officials, analysts and field operators"; joint operations; and providing assistance on "transportation, border and immigration control challenges" to "stem effectively the flow of terrorist-related material, money and people."²⁶ Given the wide variation in capacities of ASEAN governments to detect and break up terrorist cells and funding flows, the professionalism and expertise of US agencies in enhancing the functional capabilities of ASEAN in interdicting the "flow of terrorist-related material, money and people" both at the inter-state and intra-state level, is greatly needed, desired, and effective. After all, a year after the initialing of the US-ASEAN Joint Declaration, the Counter Terrorism Intelligence Center (CTIC), a joint CIA-Thai agency, was successful in tracking down and capturing Hambali.²⁷

The key question, however, is whether the operationally driven, counter-terrorist focus of US-ASEAN cooperation in the war on terror in Southeast Asia is sufficient on its own. The fact remains that Indonesia, the ideological and operational locus of the transnational *Jemaah Islamiyah* terror network, has yet to target JI decisively. This omission has prompted respected observers to casti-

gate Jakarta for not moving decisively enough against terror. Moreover, Muslim-dominated southern Thailand has been wracked by steadily escalating violence and some analysts consider the area “fertile ground for terrorism.”²⁸ Chillingly, suicide terror attacks by Islamist militants, long believed to be a Middle Eastern phenomenon unlikely to take root in Southeast Asia, has occurred as well. The Bali attacks of 12 October 2002, and the 5 August 2003 Jakarta Marriott bombing involved suicide bombers, and it is believed that a recent blast on a ferry in waters off Manila involved a suicide bomber trained by the *Abu Sayyaf*.²⁹ Furthermore, on 9 September 2004, yet another suicide bomb attack was mounted in Jakarta, this time targeting the Australian embassy.³⁰ Even more worrying, it appears that JI itself “is breaking into smaller independent – and perhaps more bellicose – splinter groups.” One example includes the hitherto unknown outfit known as Republic Persatuan Islam Indonesia, implicated in a plot to attack the national police headquarters in Jakarta.³¹ In addition, the International Crisis Group recently identified another JI splinter group called *Mujahidin Kompak*, which is fomenting Christian-Muslim violence in central Sulawesi.³² Hence, while enhanced counter-terrorist measures may help identify and eliminate individual militants and cells, one thing is clear: the *ideological milieu* which motivates some Southeast Asian Muslims to engage in terrorism cannot be neutralized by better intelligence sharing, enhanced border security and immigration procedures, and capacity-building exercises.

ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY: THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN WAR ON TERROR

It is insufficiently recognized that it is not only the militants themselves, but also the Islamist ideology they carry around in their heads, that matter. That this ideology has very concrete, operational implications emerges from the following excerpt from a November 2002 Indonesian police interrogation of Imam Samudra, the convicted field coordinator of the Bali attacks of the previous month. When asked why he had engaged in the Bali terrorist strike, Samudra replied:

To oppose the barbarity of the US army of the Cross and its allies ... to take revenge for the pain of ... weak men, women and babies who died without sin when thousands of tonnes of bombs were dropped in Afghanistan in September 2001 [sic] ... during Ramadan To carry out a [sic] my responsibility to wage a global jihad against Jews and Christians throughout the world As a manifestation of Islamic solidarity between Moslems, not limited by geographic boundaries. To carry out Allah’s order in the Book of An-nisa, verses 74-76, which concerns the obligation to defend weak men, weak women, and innocent babies, who are always the targets of the barbarous actions of the American terrorists and their allies ...

Samudra continued:

So that the American terrorists and their allies understand that the blood of Moslems is expensive and valuable; and cannot be – is forbidden to be – toyed with and made a target of American terrorists and their allies. So that the [American and allied] terrorists understand how painful it is to lose a [sic] mothers, husbands, children, or other family members, which is what they have so arbitrarily inflicted on Moslems throughout the world. To prove to Allah – the Almighty and most deserving of praise – that we will do whatever we can to defend weak Moslems, and to wage war against the US imperialists and their allies.³³

Closer analysis of the excerpt reveals several key themes common to Islamists worldwide: the notion of a global Islamic community “not limited by geographic boundaries” that must be defended; the “US army of the Cross and its allies” representing the repository of the “Crusader spirit” of this age, an idea that finds deep resonance within the writings of Egyptian Brotherhood activist Sayyid Qutb³⁴ which have been circulated within the JI network; the idea that JI is seeking to wage a legitimate defensive *jihad* to “defend weak men, weak women, and innocent babies, who are always the targets of the barbarous actions of the American terrorists and their allies”; the rationale of avenging the deaths of innocent, helpless Muslim civilians at the hands of “the American terrorists and their allies” in Muslim states such as Afghanistan; the importance of driving home the point that the blood of Muslims is not cheap;³⁵ the obligation to give the “the American terrorists and their allies” a taste of their own medicine, figuratively speaking; and finally, and of the utmost significance, the notion that an integral aspect of the definition of being a good Muslim is the willingness to “prove to Allah” that one is willing to wage global *jihad* in defence of the faith anywhere. While not at all condoning what Imam Samudra and his cell did on 12 October 2002, it is nonetheless very clear that his ideological worldview predisposed him to see that he was engaged in what to him was a legitimate, defensive holy war against the “American terrorists and their allies,” who are perceived to be persecuting and oppressing innocent Muslim civilians throughout the world of Islam.

Samudra added that he had formed his convictions from reading the works of Islamist writers such as Sayyid Qutb, as well as articles posted on certain radical Internet sites. Samudra’s admission that he had been influenced by what he himself had absorbed from the Internet underscores the real danger that *al-Qaeda* – quite apart from its institutional and other linkages with JI – through numerous Internet sites, is becoming an ideology that many young, Southeast Asian Muslims, increasingly conscious of their membership in, and obligations to, the transnational, global Islamic community or *ummah*, are finding emotionally powerful. What cannot be over-emphasized is that it is actually incorrect to hold that the Islamists are guilty of *twisting* Islamic scripture to justify *jihad* against

the West. There is in fact sufficient backing in the Qur'an and other sources for a *fully legitimate defensive jihad* against any enemy judged by prominent Islamic scholars as having committed aggression against Islam. So at the level of the justification for waging *jihad*, Islamist clerics need not distort the scriptures. They merely need to persuade young Muslim men that the *ummah* is under attack and that legally speaking all Muslims are supposed to take up arms to defend the wider Muslim community. That is *precisely* why radical ideologues will exploit any mistake or badly conceived action of the US or its allies, in order to sustain the "Grand Narrative" of Muslims under attack by the so-called Jewish-Crusader axis. The power of this message over thousands of young alienated Muslims, especially when articulated by religious figures, should not be underestimated.

What emerges unequivocally from the preceding discussion is that there is a very virulent anti-American theme running through the Islamist ideology that enables *al-Qaeda* and JI to recruit replacements for fallen or captured members. The irony is that Washington's Middle East policy and US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq inadvertently confer legitimacy on the ideology. The unfortunate result is that it is not just radicals who believe that the Islamic world is under siege by the US and its allies. A Pew Center survey in summer 2003 found that the number of Indonesians with a favorable view of the US fell sharply over the past year, from 61 percent of respondents to only 15 percent.³⁶ Then, in September, former Indonesian President Megawati, speaking at the United Nations, criticized Washington's pro-Israeli tilt, arguing that the major powers needed to be more impartial and ensure that "all the parties involved are given just and equal treatment" in the Arab-Israeli conflict. She added that the US-led invasion of Iraq had "created far more problems than those it intended to solve."³⁷ Hence, while the overwhelming majority of Southeast Asian Muslims remain moderate, the number that share *al-Qaeda's* sense of injustice and rage, and conviction that a militant jihad to fight "the American terrorists and their allies" is obligatory, is unfortunately, gradually growing.³⁸ In the key state of Indonesia, the "US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan" have strengthened "radical sentiments" among students especially.³⁹ The upshot of all this could not be clearer: all attempts by the Bush White House to promote a better image of America through enhanced public diplomacy measures are unlikely to have an appreciable impact. Not when precious few in the Muslim world actually *trust* America.⁴⁰

The abysmally poor image of America among Southeast Asian Muslims is thus another powerful reason why ASEAN governments have found it very difficult to prosecute the war on terror in Southeast Asia with greater efficiency. In Muslim majority states like Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as in states with sizeable Muslim minorities such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, governments are understandably not keen to come across as uncritically identified with every aspect of US foreign policy toward the Muslim world. In the key

Southeast Asian state of Indonesia, newly elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a secular nationalist leader with few Islamic credentials of his own, knows he must be careful not to be perceived as anti-Muslim. In both Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as other ASEAN states with significant Muslim populations, there is also the anxiety that uncritical acceptance of everything Washington does in the Middle East, Iraq, and Afghanistan may lead to increased disenchantment and even the radicalization of pockets of Muslims, rendering them vulnerable to Islamist recruitment. In fact, following the Bali and Marriott bombings, conspiracy theories did the rounds in Jakarta, purporting that the CIA masterminded the attacks to prove that terrorist networks do exist in Indonesia, so that Indonesia would be dragooned into supporting the American-led war on terror.⁴¹

The upshot of all this is that over and above lingering bilateral problems, capacity shortfalls, low-level corruption among immigration officials and security forces, and the daunting challenge of policing maritime boundaries in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's counter-terror campaign has also been hampered ironically by the attitudes and behavior of the United States itself. This has added an element of circumspection in the regional prosecution of the counter-terror campaign against JI. Thus, in early September 2003, an Indonesian court sentenced alleged JI spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir to only four years in jail on charges of being involved in a series of church bombings in 2000. Significantly, he was found not guilty of being JI's spiritual leader or *amir*, something that would have earned him a much stiffer sentence. This decision prompted one Western analyst to characterize the judgement a "glorified slap on the wrist."⁴² In addition, it was pointed out shortly after that in fact, Hamzah Haz, the former vice-president of Indonesia and leader of that country's largest Islamic party, the United Development Party (PPP), had been working behind the scenes to influence the outcome of the Bashir trial. There had apparently been anxiety at the highest levels in Jakarta that had Bashir been found guilty of the more serious charge of leading JI, Megawati might have been obliged to close down his religious boarding school or *pesantren* in Solo, Central Java as well as disband his Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI) mass organization. It was feared that such action, while it may have gone down well in Washington, might at the same time have made Jakarta look like a lackey of the US ahead of the now-concluded 2004 elections.⁴³ It would appear that the new Yudhoyono administration in Jakarta has, like its predecessor, elected to tread carefully over Bashir. In March 2005, the cleric was jailed for 30 months for being part of the conspiracy behind the Bali blasts. He was absolved of being the mastermind behind the attack, which would have justified a much longer sentence. While some analysts point to the weakness of the prosecution's case, the US State Department was nonetheless right to be "disturbed by the message sent by the relatively brief sentence."⁴⁴

The visceral fear of being accused by the Islamists of being the stooge of an America out to subjugate Muslims has been evinced in a myriad other ways.

Megawati and now President Bambang has not dared to proscribe JI in the country.⁴⁵ This is because the name *Jemaah Islamiyah* in fact simply means the “broader Muslim community.”⁴⁶ For its part, Kuala Lumpur, in setting up the Southeast Asian Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre in 2003 – an initiative which received US financial support – nevertheless took pains to deny any overt “US interference” in its running.⁴⁷ The Thaksin government in Thailand, meanwhile, found itself having to move very carefully when Thai Muslims in the southern town of Narathiwat considered the arrests of alleged JI militants in their midst as a “gesture of appeasement to the United States, and that US President George W. Bush is bent on creating a climate of distrust of Muslims.”⁴⁸ In short, it must be recognized that the very vitality of the virulently anti-American, Islamist ideology circulating in Muslim Southeast Asia is fueled directly by Washington’s foreign policy stance and military errors in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the wider Muslim world. Ill-conceived US political and military actions unwittingly *reinforce* the negative stereotypes promoted by the radicals – thereby sustaining a supercharged political and ideological milieu within which ASEAN’s counter-terror cooperation with the US and its Western allies is inevitably hampered.

THE PROBLEM: THE 4D STRATEGY IS A *DIRECT* STRATEGY

The foregoing suggests that operationally focused activities aimed at building ASEAN state capacity to detect and eliminate the operations and logistical arrangements of JI is just part of what must be done. In addition, a great deal of effort must be expended on targeting the ideological basis on which JI thrives and which it and its co-ideologists exploit to undermine the legitimacy of US allies in Southeast Asia. Washington may not be well placed, however, to orchestrate and engage in a ratcheted up ideological and political warfare campaign, in which the “Diminish” element of the 4D Strategy receives much greater attention. The reason for this has been the rather militarized orientation of US foreign policy, a trend that predated but became much more pronounced during the Bush era.⁴⁹ Dana Priest observes that one reason for this has been the inexorable decline in the State Department’s operating budget and staff strength since the 1970s. This trend caused successive administrations to turn to the Defence Department to take on tasks that had formerly been carried out by civilian agencies, such as de-mining, anti-narcotics operations, anti-terrorism, humanitarian disaster relief, and even disarmament.⁵⁰ Inevitably, the military instrument gradually assumed a central, even distorting, importance in policy circles. Hence, William Pfaff avers that the “the availability of overwhelming force” has influenced “the formulation of policy in ways that invite military remedies, even when these may be irrelevant.”⁵¹ Indeed, in line with our earlier observation of the “muscular Wilsonianism” displayed by the Bush White House, Andrew Bacevich notes that especially after 11 September “the Bush administration no longer views force as the last resort; rather, it considers military power to be

America's most effective instrument of statecraft." Bacevich feels that the NSS candidly acknowledges the "progressively greater militarization of U.S. foreign policy."⁵²

11 September greatly empowered what Pfaff calls the "military considerations and modes of thought" that had been featuring prominently in the foreign policy discourse in the 1990s. Such a policy orientation, as Pfaff puts it, encourages an "uncritical recourse to military measures to deal not only with foreign policy crises but with such civil society issues as terrorism" for which "the only real solutions (where they exist) are political."⁵³ At the current time, such "military considerations and modes of thought" have geared key Bush administration officials toward adopting what the great French strategist Andre Beaufre would have called a *direct strategy* in the global war on terror. That is, Washington has emphasized military power as the primary instrument of what Beaufre called "total strategy," with the various legal, administrative, diplomatic, economic, and financial resources of several government agencies and Coalition partners orchestrated in close support of the principal military thrust.⁵⁴ Evidence that "military considerations and modes of thought" have driven post-11 September US grand strategy has not been confined to the new pre-emption doctrine applied against Baghdad – and might yet be applied against other rogue states suspected of possessing WMD or being engaged in their proliferation.⁵⁵ It is manifested in, *inter alia*, the expanded role of US special operations forces worldwide;⁵⁶ the willingness to assassinate *al-Qaeda* elements located within the sovereign jurisdiction of another state;⁵⁷ the decision to retain global military freedom of action by not subjecting US servicemen to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court;⁵⁸ the painfully evident dearth of systematic, non-military, administrative planning for the governance of post-war Iraq;⁵⁹ the failure to balance operational intelligence requirements with the need for upholding basic human rights that led to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal,⁶⁰ and, as noted, the operationally driven, counter-terrorist biased slant of the 4D Strategy promulgated in February 2003. As we have argued, the 4D Strategy is in the Beaufrean sense a direct strategy precisely because of its strong counter-terrorist focus. As it stands, the 4D Strategy is not likely to undermine the ideological basis upon which JI builds its appeal. Hence the 4D Strategy is unlikely to prevent JI from regenerating. What must be done is to greatly flesh out and systematize the rather underdeveloped "Diminish" element of the current 4D Strategy and make it the *central plank*, certainly as far as Southeast Asia is concerned. The following section suggests how the rich Southeast Asian heritage might be trowled in order to beef up this all-important element.

**FLESHING OUT A 4D (INDIRECT) STRATEGY:
LEARNING FROM MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA**

Malaysia is often pilloried by the Western news media for its Internal Security Act. While such criticisms were muted somewhat following 11 September and the passage in October 2001 of the US Patriot Act, it is a pity that analysts have not gone further into the Malaysian experience to unearth possible “lessons” for exploitation in the current war on terror. What might be of particular relevance today is the so-called Malayan Emergency. This refers to the 12-year long counterinsurgency campaign waged by the British colonial, and later independent Malayan governments against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). The conflict began in June 1948 and was virtually over by the end of 1958, when mass surrenders of CPM guerrillas compelled Chin Peng, the CPM secretary-general, to demobilize his forces. There have been many explanations as to why the Malayan government was able to eventually outlast the communists. Apart from inherent demographic, leadership, doctrinal, and logistical weaknesses on the communist side, most historians point to a very effective British counterinsurgency strategy that included: resettlement programs that snapped the link between the CPM and the strategically important rural Chinese squatters, tin miners, and rubber tappers; the provision of well-defended, well-equipped, and economically viable new villages for the resettled Chinese; close civil-military administrative and intelligence cooperation on the government side; a deliberate effort to utilize minimum force in counterinsurgency operations; and, of particular interest in the context of this article, an effective political warfare campaign.⁶¹

While one has to keep in mind the very real differences, in both scale and context, between 1950s Malaya and the war on terror today, it would seem that the Malayan Emergency suggests certain elements that should be considered in developing a greatly enhanced “Diminish” element of the 4D Strategy. What is suggested here is that the Emergency could be mined for insights into fashioning a longer-term political warfare campaign. Such a campaign would be the heart of a revamped 4D (Indirect) Strategy in which the “Diminish” element occupies center stage. In this new conception the 4D (I) Strategy would resemble a Beaufrean indirect approach in which the “Defeat,” “Deny,” and “Defend” elements would still be operative, but in much more deliberate calibration and integration with the central “Diminish” elements. To be fair, as it stands the “Diminish” aspects of the current 4D Strategy favored by Washington has already been applied to Southeast Asia, to Mindanao in particular. Mindanao, the locus of the Moro insurgency the transnational JI has long been seeking to hijack, is not simply a military problem. The Filipino Agrarian Reform Secretary has asserted that the key to achieving peace in Mindanao is “land reform.”⁶² In line with this outlook, Washington has tried to coordinate international efforts to assist Manila in implementing schemes aimed at improving basic education, increasing employment by creating small to medium-scale industries, and pro-

viding university scholarships for Muslim Mindanese.⁶³ However, at least in Southeast Asia, socioeconomic factors do not cause terrorism. They generate what may be called “political oxygen” that is exploited by Islamists to fashion a compelling ideological “Grand Narrative.” It is this “Grand Narrative” that is then deployed to recruit followers.⁶⁴ Quite apart from alleviating socioeconomic deficits throughout Southeast Asia, therefore, targeting the Islamists ideologically is imperative in order to degrade their capacity to motivate and regenerate.

The first “lesson” from the Emergency that has arguably a great deal of relevance today is the injunction to be “propaganda-minded.” In Malaya, from 1952 onwards, government officials, soldiers, and policemen were always told to be more “propaganda-minded.” That is, they were told that it was quite pointless to have the Government Information Services telling ordinary Malaysians, especially the Chinese, that government was their friend when the attitudes and behavior of officials, soldiers, and police toward the Chinese suggested the complete opposite – that government did not trust them at all and saw all of them as communists. Kuala Lumpur, therefore, wanted to ensure that the positive message coming from its official rhetoric was not inadvertently negated by a contradictory message emanating from the actions of its agents on the ground.⁶⁵ Similarly, America and its allies must recognize that rough handling by troops, even brutality toward civilians, in Iraq and/or Afghanistan as well as any accidental killing of Muslim civilians by US and allied forces in military operations, can all generate political oxygen. When mediated through CNN, *Al-Jazeera* as well as Internet websites, such political oxygen can fuel the Islamist “Grand Narrative” of an America bent on subjugating Islam – and that it is a religious obligation to wage *jihad* to defend the faith. It cannot be emphasized enough that convicted Bali bombers Mukhlas and Imam Samudra claimed that in their own minds the Bali attack was fully justified as a response to Afghan civilian deaths resulting from bombing during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. In short, there is unfortunately a direct link between US and allied mistakes and Islamist terrorist recruitment and activity.

Hence, it might be salutary if US officials and commanders in Washington and on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan be more “propaganda-minded” i.e. pay closer attention to the potential political implications of policies, strategies, and tactics employed in the counter-terror war. Even one egregious mistake is too many and can be exploited for maximum propaganda effect. In this regard Washington must in the short-term take care to ensure that US forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq are better trained to cope with looting and rioting. Any resort to disproportionate force as demonstrated in the Fallujah incident in late April 2003, in which 15 Iraqis were killed by US troops during an anti-American rally, would only strengthen the anti-US, global *jihad* propaganda of Islamist recruiters.⁶⁶ Moreover, much more precision in minimizing civilian casualties during ongoing combat operations against Iraqi insurgents is very important. The reported 600 civilian deaths – “most of them women, children and the eld-

erly” – arising from the US Marine attack on Fallujah in April 2004 only provided more grist for the radical Islamist propaganda mill in Iraq and worldwide.⁶⁷ The deliberate aim, in short, should be to seek creative ways to cut off the sources of political oxygen that radical clerics everywhere exploit to fuel the “Grand Narrative.”⁶⁸

That security forces and local officials ought systematically to audit their policies, tactics, and even everyday behavior toward the local population in order to reduce political oxygen, is something that not just Washington, but even some Southeast Asian governments themselves should insist upon. The Islamist insurgency that has been steadily escalating in largely Muslim southern Thailand since January 2004 appears to be worsening, as the insurgents appear to be developing greater technical sophistication in their attacks against Thai security forces and Buddhist civilians. Over 600 people were killed in 2004.⁶⁹ The conflict in southern Thailand has very deep roots, having grown out of an old separatist movement harking back to the glories of the old Muslim sultanate of Pattani, and driven in the past century by enduring Thai Muslim resentment at perceived socio-economic and cultural marginalization by Buddhist Bangkok.⁷⁰ More recently, however, the growing transnational Islamist identity of the insurgency seems partly a result of “the apparent emulation of the American militarized approach by the Thai counter-terrorism authorities,” something, according to respected Indian analyst B. Raman, which has been “fuelling the jihadi fire.”⁷¹ In this respect, the heavy-handed tactics of Thai security forces certainly generated a great deal of political oxygen for exploitation both locally and beyond. This provocative behavior included the killing of militants inside the historic Kru Se mosque in Pattani province on 28 April 2004, and the even more egregious events surrounding Tak Bai, in Narathiwat province six months later in which 78 young Thai Muslims, arrested for their part in a mass demonstration, suffocated to death aboard cramped trucks en route to an army base.⁷² Indeed, according to Human Rights Watch, “the Thai name has appeared” on Arabic websites.⁷³

Over the longer term, it is vital that Washington and its allies expend sufficient resources in both Iraq and Afghanistan to ensure that both states emerge as modern, progressive Muslim members of the international community.⁷⁴ By failing to stay the course in both Iraq and Afghanistan the US and UK would further reinforce the JI storyline that “Crusader” America and its allies are at war with Islam. In Southeast Asia this view would help sustain the network’s ideological appeal in some Muslim quarters. The new Office of Global Communications, created by Executive Order of the US president in January 2003, might take the lead in urging that Washington’s public diplomacy and actual deeds project an identical positive message to a skeptical Muslim world.⁷⁵ Finally, the US and the international community must persist in seeking the creation of an independent, viable Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel, and ensuring that the status of Jerusalem is justly resolved.⁷⁶

A second lesson of the Emergency may be called “Divide and Conquer.” In Malaya the Psychological Warfare Section led by the legendary Tan Sri Dato C.C. Too always tried to split the CPM rank and file guerrillas from their leaders. Psywar efforts focussed on highlighting and emphasizing very deliberately the precise ways in which the CPM leaders lived it up in the jungle at the expense of their foot soldiers. Deliberate care was also taken not to paint the rank and file as evil. The line taken instead was that the guerrillas were essentially honorable men who had been misled by the evil and nefarious CPM leadership.⁷⁷ Similarly, there remains scope for driving a wedge between Islamist leaders, on the one hand, and their foot soldiers and the wider community of Islamist sympathizers, on the other, which may be done by exploiting contradictions between the pious rhetoric of Islamist leaders and their actual behavior. In Pakistan, for instance, it is known that many *jihadi* leaders live luxuriously, while foot soldiers are sent to be “cannon fodder” in Kashmir.⁷⁸ Moreover, the recent terror attacks in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Indonesia produced numerous Muslim casualties. These represent political oxygen generated by the radicals that should be exploited to construct a counter-narrative of a morally decrepit radical *jihadi* leadership tarnishing a great civilization. In Southeast Asia, for example, the systematic construction of a counter-narrative can involve highlighting on websites and in the broadcast and print media the ways JI leaders have exploited their status at the expense of their well-meaning, generally decent, but sadly misguided rank and file. In addition, the moral failings of Islamist leaders, such as the penchant of certain individuals for pornographic websites, can also be exploited to cast doubts among potential recruits about the alleged moral uprightness of their leaders. Last but not least, like the surrendered enemy personnel (SEP) of the CPM insurgency, the testimony of JI detainees, who have witnessed the less savory aspects of their leaders at first hand, should be given much wider and sustained publicity to further discredit the image of the regional JI leadership.

A third and final lesson from the Emergency might be to “fight fire with fire.” In Malaya the government deployed SEPs throughout the new villages to warn the ordinary Chinese against joining the CPM. Very early on Government Information Services decided that the best people to counter communist Chinese propaganda had to be other Chinese who knew the communists inside out, who spoke the same language, who had the same background, and who knew precisely what the communists were going to say and how to counter them. Moreover, it was accepted that such SEPs had much more *locus standi* in the Chinese new villages than British and government information officers precisely because very often the SEPs came from the same locality or background.⁷⁹ In today’s context, a much more strategic role in the counter-propaganda war should be played by progressive Islamic scholars who have the language, scriptural knowledge and importantly, like the SEPs in 1950s Malaya, sufficient *locus standi* within Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Such clerics are best placed to exploit, for instance, the July 1997 admission by the *Gamaa Islamiya*

terrorist group that its campaign of terror in Egypt had been utterly misguided ideologically. Conventional psywar operators in the US and ASEAN militaries may have the technical skills, but are not likely to be sufficiently equipped to exploit such “propaganda opportunities.”

In fact, progressive Muslim scholars even ought to “fight fire with fire” at the grand strategic level, in the wider contest for the future trajectory of Islam within Southeast Asia and even worldwide. In this respect Indonesia, for all the bad press it gets for being a so-called haven for militant Islam, also happens to be a tremendous source of very erudite, learned Islamic scholars, such as Azyumardi Azra, Bahtiar Effendy, Nurcholish Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid, who are quite capable of engaging with their Middle Eastern counterparts on the finer points of Islamic law.⁸⁰ They are especially well placed to mount well-reasoned critiques of the cosmic Jewish-Crusader Axis versus Islam “Grand Narrative” integral to the Islamism of *al-Qaeda* and JI. Moreover, such scholars have sought to do away with the binary “us-versus-them,” dichotomized worldview favored by the Islamists and have generally celebrated the value of religious pluralism. Abdurrahman Wahid, for instance, has called for a cosmopolitan Islam that is fully capable of functioning in a pluralistic religious and cultural context.⁸¹ Indonesian scholars are extremely well placed, moreover, to lead more extensive discussion of topics, such as various understandings of *jihad*; ways to reconcile the obligations of dual citizenship in both a national state as well as a transnational Islamic community or *ummah*; and the challenges and rewards of practising one’s faith within a modern, secular, multi-religious society. What seems particularly important is more discussion on the various interpretations of the *dar al islam* or realm of Islam. As well-known Egyptian-born, European-based Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan suggests, Muslims “should not consider Europe and other ‘non-Muslim’ countries as lands of darkness, the *dar al-harb*, and therefore unsafe for Muslims.”⁸² More open debate within the Muslim community in Southeast Asia will also foster greater critical thinking that might well be an antidote to Islamist recruitment. It is telling that the Singapore government’s January 2003 White Paper on the JI threat noted that the Singapore JI detainees relied heavily upon their leaders for pointing out what “true Islam meant.” They themselves had found it “stressful to be critical, evaluative and rational,” and displayed “high compliance, low assertiveness,” and did not really question their religious values. This rendered them very vulnerable to manipulation and indoctrination by the leaders.⁸³ In this respect Washington’s plans to invest US \$250 million into improving Indonesia’s 178,000 state schools and 10,000 “West-tolerant” Muslim-run schools may help encourage greater critical thinking and less intellectual subcontracting among Indonesia’s young Muslims.⁸⁴

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE WIDER WAR ON TERROR

This article insisted at the outset that a bottom-up, strategic perspective capable of better understanding important indigenous and local factors is more likely to effectively neutralize Islamist terror networks in Southeast Asia. In fact, the article has sought to revamp the US National Strategy for Countering Terrorism or 4D Strategy in light of Southeast Asian conditions. We saw that as currently constituted the US 4D Strategy is in essence a direct strategy in which shorter term, operationally driven counter-terrorist elements predominate. We argued instead that a 4 D (I) or indirect strategy, in which longer-term, ideologically and politically sensitized counter-terrorism elements play a more dominant role, is more likely to achieve the most important objective of denying Islamist terror networks the capacity to regenerate. In particular, we sought to flesh out such a 4D (I) Strategy with its central “Diminish” element through an examination of the Malaysian and Indonesian experience. Perhaps a final issue should be addressed by way of conclusion: to what extent would a Southeast Asian 4D (I) Strategy be more broadly applicable to the wider war on terror?

This article suggests that the 4D (I) approach is at the conceptual level superior to the current 4D approach because in essence the Islamist terror threat in Southeast Asia is a microcosm of the wider challenge posed by *al-Qaeda* and other new offshoots. The challenge is only partly to detect and eliminate Islamist terrorists and disrupt their operational plans and logistical lines. The overriding task is to prevent new groups, institutionally independent of one another, but all inspired by local and regional variants of the ideological “Grand Narrative,” from coalescing and/or regenerating. Ultimately, as Ajay Sahni argues, rather than a “transient geographical location or concentrations of terrorist incidents, activities and movements,” it is Islamist ideology *per se* that represents “the actual limits or foci of extremist Islamist terrorism.”⁸⁵ It is this ideology that is the true centre of gravity of the militant Islamist threat. This is why an indirect strategy, similar in conception to the one proposed here but localized through “bottom-up” analytical processes in the various theatres of concern, is best placed to neutralize Islamist terror in the years to come.

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