

The Post-September 11 Geostrategic Landscape and Southeast Asian Response to the Threat of Terrorism

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About the Speaker

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THE POST-SEPTEMBER 11 GEOSTRATEGIC LANDSCAPE AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN RESPONSE TO THE THREAT OF TERRORISM.

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States constituted the single most important new development in the international security environment over the past one year. What have been the effects of the dramatic events since 11 September on the geopolitical landscape? How durable will they be? How has Southeast Asia been affected? In our analysis, we have to be mindful not to fall prey to the *post hoc, propter hoc* (after this therefore because of this) fallacy, that is, the mistaken notion that simply because an event happened *after* another, the first event was the cause of the second. What I seek to do here is to come up with broad sketches of the geopolitical landscape after September 11.

US Policies

It was clear even before September 2001 that the current US Administration was going to be more robust in the defense of US interests in the world than the previous administration. 11 September has reinforced its assertiveness and augmented its interventionism. John Chipman, Director of the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies, has described the mood in this Administration post-September 11 as “hyper-interventionist”. It springs from the trauma of the devastating attack of 11 September and from the requirements of the anti-terror war--- the removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the pursuit and uprooting of Al Qaeda leaders and cells wherever they might be in the world. All countries, and especially those that have Al Qaeda-linked Muslim terrorist groups, have been under pressure from the US to cooperate in the fight against terrorism.

This US Administration had strong unilateral tendencies even before 11 September as reflected in its stance on issues ranging from the Kyoto Protocol on global warming to ballistic missile defense. Some thought that the war against terrorism would inhibit these tendencies by forcing Washington to work with other countries in the international coalition that was being forged. This seemed to be happening in the immediate aftermath of 11 September when there was broad sympathy and support for the US. Even though the world soon learned that the coalition would work largely on US terms, most countries found it to be in their own interests to cooperate.

However, subsequent pronouncements by President George Bush, starting with his State of the Union address in late January 2002 in which he first spoke of “the Axis of Evil”, caused misgivings in Europe and in parts of Asia, because they seemed to mark a shift in US foreign policy towards including pre-emptive action against states supporting terrorism and against terrorists in third countries, with hints by officials that the latter could even be targeted without the prior consent or knowledge of the host governments..

Interventionism is not necessarily a bad thing, especially when the quarry is an international menace like Al-Qaeda terrorism, which can be defeated only with US involvement. But it does matter when such intervention is carried out in a way that is perceived to represent American arrogance and unilateralism—some of the very elements that produced anti US sentiments in the Muslim world. Alternatively, it could also be seen as part of a genuinely cooperative international effort, albeit under the leadership of the US. Unilateralism of the former kind that causes an erosion of the trust and comfort in America’s international leadership role would be a major setback for the global order.

Severe strains in the anti terrorism coalition may still develop if the proposed war against Iraq proceeds, especially if victory is not quick and decisive. Such strains, together with possible

political repercussions in the Arab world and diversion of US resources to the Iraqi theatre could set back the war against terrorism. Iraq's reported possession of chemical and biological weapons raises the risks of war significantly as there is a real danger that these weapons will be used against US forces deployed against Iraq, against oilfields in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, or even against the continental US homeland by Iraqi agents or other terrorists working with them.

The Asian Geopolitical Landscape

The war against terrorism has resulted in increased US military presence and diplomatic influence in Asia, though in some cases, this was only an acceleration of the trends that began before 11 September 2001. Most countries do not mind this state of affairs, however irked they may be at times by US demands, because they realize that the new global threat of terrorism can only be dealt with under US leadership and also because of the potential advantages, economic or political, that could be gained from cooperation with the Americans. The US military now operates from bases in Central Asia, in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan, something that would have been almost unthinkable only a year ago, before 11 September--- notwithstanding the fact that the US was seeking to develop military links in Central Asia even before the terrorist attacks.

There has been a strategic alignment of Russia towards the US and the West. This might have come anyway under the Bush Administration, but 11 September accelerated the process by highlighting their strong common interest in fighting terrorism. Japan also seized the opportunity to raise its profile in international security affairs by using its navy to provide logistic support to the US fleet in the Indian Ocean conducting military operations in Afghanistan.

The US is also developing closer military ties with India. Though this trend began before 11 September, it has probably been strengthened by events since 11 September. Indian naval ships, for instance, have been escorting US naval and commercial vessels carrying high-value cargo like ammunition, fuel and other supplies through the Straits of Malacca.

In Southeast Asia, there has been a re-engagement of the US in the security sense, though focused at this stage principally on the anti-terrorism war, as evidenced, for example, in the expanded military cooperation with the Philippines and the recently concluded ASEAN-US Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism.

How permanent will this expanded US military presence be? It is perhaps still too early to judge. Much will depend on how the war against terrorism proceeds, developments in Pakistan, and US perception of its longer-term strategic interests in Asia. A clue to the future may be to look at areas where the US was seeking to expand its military links even before 11 September with the Asian power balance in mind.

A US military presence in Central Asia is likely to continue for the long term in view of the significance of the region for oil and gas and its strategic importance vis a vis both Afghanistan and China. Military cooperation with India, with possible access arrangements to ports and other facilities, is likely to expand if the strategic interests of the two countries in Asia continue to converge. And closer military cooperation with key countries in Southeast Asia is unlikely to be a passing phenomenon, given the perceived importance of the region for both the war against terrorism and US geopolitical competition with China.

US-China Relations

There has been an increased sense of strategic vulnerability on the part of the Chinese since 11 September as America's military presence has grown around China. Beijing suspects that under the framework of the anti-terror war, the US has conveniently been expanding its military presence in Asia to the geopolitical detriment of China. Further, Russia's swing into the American and Western orbit not only undermines the objective of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to check dominant US power through multi-polarity, but also, in China's eyes, raises the spectre of the "advance" of NATO towards China's western borders.

However, such perceived setbacks may also contribute to the development of a more sophisticated Chinese foreign policy premised on the consideration that so long as China remains relatively weak economically and militarily vis- a- vis the US, its longer term interests are best served by working more with the international community, including the US, for a more secure and prosperous world---and that as China's economic power grows and its credentials as a good citizen of the international community strengthen, its regional and international influence will follow naturally.

But, if cooperation and engagement, especially in the economic arena, is one side of the coin of the US-China relationship, strategic competition will remain the other. The competition is rooted in the structural problem of the distribution of power in Asia and so cannot be dissipated by any temporary coincidence of interests on specific issues. The rivalry will probably be muted for some time by US preoccupation with the war on terrorism and China's preoccupation with domestic affairs, especially in managing the political risks and risks to stability associated with the transformation of its economy.

Terrorism is also a threat to China, but more in the longer-term. Among China's strategic thinkers, there will be those who regard an ideal outcome as one where the US would destroy the terrorist threat but itself becomes strategically weakened in the process. As mentioned earlier, given the uncertainties ahead in relation to a possible war with Iraq, the future of Pakistan and its nuclear weapons, and the possibility of terrorist attacks on the US with weapons of mass destruction, such thinking cannot be dismissed as entirely fanciful. But just how much weakening of the US? From a rational perspective of China's interests, perhaps just enough to make the US less "arrogant" and to give more space to China in the international arena. Too much weakening, with resultant international instability, given America's pivotal position in an increasingly globalised international system, could be to China's net disadvantage.

Southeast Asia

The start of US bombing of Afghanistan in autumn 2001 aroused the feelings of sections of Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia and Indonesia, political opponents of the governments and extremists sought to exploit the situation for their own ends. Both Dr Mahathir and President Megawati condemned American bombings to placate domestic sentiments, even though, in other ways, Malaysia cooperated closely with the US in the anti-terror war. The problem was more serious in Indonesia, where well publicized anti-American agitation by some Islamic groups strengthened perceptions of instability in the country. Some of the early unfortunate rhetoric of American leaders about the threat from Islamic terrorists and the battle to be waged against them (for instance the reference to a "global crusade" against terrorism usually meant for domestic American consumption, did not go down well with Muslim communities.

Any American invasion of Iraq this year or next could again incite Muslim passions and pose some problems for Southeast Asian governments with large Muslim populations. While most of the governments affected are likely to cope successfully with the discontent, Indonesia's fledgling democracy could be tested by extremist groups.

After 11 September, Southeast Asia has had to take much greater cognizance of the threat of international terrorism and its links to domestic Muslim terrorist or separatist elements. The degree of threat has varied from country to country though American facilities are potential targets in all. Singapore, with its small size, dense urban setting and many American establishments, would be viewed by Al Qaeda as particularly target-rich. Indeed countries with largely Muslim populations are not necessarily at greater risk. For instance, the 1995 plot to blow up a dozen American airliners over the Pacific was hatched in Manila while, more recently, Singapore was the place where western embassies were targeted for attack in a plan involving terrorist cells in a number of Southeast Asian countries. Both plots were foiled by state security agencies.

On their part, Southeast Asian states have, not surprisingly, sought to take advantage of the international sentiment against terrorism to move strongly against domestic terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* (KMM) in Malaysia that also have links with Al Qaeda. The perceived threat from these domestic groups also provides the states with a strong motivation to cooperate with the US against Al Qaeda and to obtain US support.

There have also been positive spin-offs for the region from developments since 11 September 2001. The perception of a common terrorist threat is strengthening regional counter-terrorism cooperation, especially in intelligence. Much of this cooperation has been bilateral and is expected to remain as such. There have also been efforts involving more than two countries but it is left to be seen how effective these will be. For instance, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines signed an agreement to cooperate in the fight against transnational crime across their common borders, including terrorism, and the three countries have also coordinated maritime patrols to interdict such threats.

Will the threat from terrorism be a catalyst for ASEAN's (Association for Southeast Asian Nations) revival? While it seems to be infusing the older six members with a new spirit of cooperation on a common security threat, the problem is that since the incorporation of the newer members, ASEAN has become too divergent in political and security interests. Still, the war against terror is bringing some benefits for Southeast Asia.

There is increased strategic attention to the region from the US that derives first and foremost from the requirement for the war against terrorism. Al Qaeda links with Southeast Asia were a source of concern to the US even before 11 September. Indeed at one time US intelligence agencies had expected the next major Al Qaeda attack on US interests, after the 1998 bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, to take place in Southeast Asia. After 11 September, the region was seen as a "second front" in the war. The other factor that could be driving US interest in the region is the longer term geopolitical contest for influence in Asia between the major powers, in particular between the US and China. It has not escaped Washington's (and Tokyo's) attention that China has stepped up its cultivation of ASEAN, the latest manifestation of this being the Chinese initiative for a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area.

In July 2002, the ASEAN-US Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat International Terrorism was signed. Its primary purpose seems to be to help stiffen the political backbone of ASEAN governments that have domestic political constraints so that they can act more firmly

against their own terrorist and extremist elements, and if necessary, seek US assistance. It is also meant to be a signal to Al Qaeda that attempts to make Southeast Asia a new safe haven will be countered.

Cooperation between terrorists organisations

Terrorist groups in Southeast Asia have cooperated with one another, even though links among them and between them and Al Qaeda are often not formal or structural.

Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the clandestine organization which was uncovered by the security agencies in Singapore in late 2001 is, in a loose sense, a branch of the JI in Indonesia. There are also JI cells in Malaysia and the Philippines. Furthermore, JI has links with Kampulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM, the Mujahidin Group of Malaysia) and with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Southern Philippines. Indeed there have been growing indications that both JI and KMM came under the broad overall direction of an Indonesian Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, while a very active deputy of his, Riduan Isamuddin (also known as Hambali), was their operational leader. The latter, still at large, was implicated, among other things, in the assassination of a Malaysian politician, a botched bank robbery, also in Malaysia, the foiled plan in 1995 to simultaneously destroy 12 American airliners over the Pacific (dubbed Operation Bojinka) and the bombing of Christian churches in Indonesia and the Philippines in 2000.

Consider also the transnational cooperation in the plan to bomb targets in Singapore. Local JI members planned to get the 21 tons of ammonium nitrate with help from KMM in Malaysia and JI - linked elements in the Philippines. The bombs were to be made under the supervision of Fathur Rohman Al-Ghozi (nicknamed Mike), an Indonesian national operating from the Philippines. Getting the suicide bombers for the mission was to be the responsibility of another Al Qaeda suspect operating from the Middle East.

KMM elements in Malaysia participated in terrorist bombings in Indonesia. Two Singapore JI members were involved in the bombing of two churches on Batam Island while one was taken to Ambon to stand on guard duty during Laskar Jihad operations against Christians there ---it was to be a sort of baptism of fire for them.

And there clearly have been links between the Southeast Asian groups and Al Qaeda. For instance, many of the JI members had been to Afghanistan for training. The videotapes of JI surveillance of Yishun MRT station and other potential targets in Singapore were found in the rubble of the residence of a very senior Al Qaeda leader in Afghanistan. Some of the more important figures in the Southeast Asian network like Hambali, Mike and Sammy are strongly suspected to be Al Qaeda operatives. Yasid Suffat, one of those arrested in Malaysia, hosted two of the suspected 11 September operatives, and he was alleged to be paymaster for the so-called 20th bomber, Zakarias Moussaoui (who has been on trial in the US), and gave him a reference letter for employment in US.

Thousands of foreign nationals have trained in Al Qaeda camps and gone back to their own countries. But there is no hierarchy linking it to them or the organizations they have returned to in their home countries. As Alvin and Heidi Toffler describe it, Al Qaeda is a relatively “flat” outfit without the usual hierarchical or even formal links to other groups it works with:

“In fact Al Qaeda’s strength derives precisely from the fact that it is small, fast, flexible and pancake-flat, while the American government is huge, slow, sclerotic and

pyramidal....Al Qaeda... is project-oriented. Each project is temporary and may involve people from different 'disciplines'---bomb making, money transfer, and target surveillance specialties. Project participants either die ---like the 9/11 terrorists---or move on to deadly new projects.”¹

So security agencies whose task is to hunt down Al Qaeda members will find that personal friendships and contacts are often more important clues to cooperation than any formal links. A common ideology based on an extremist interpretation of the Islam also facilitates informal and ad hoc cooperation across borders: it generates a remarkable sense of trust irrespective of race, language or color of the skin.

Impact of 11 September on Individual Southeast Asian Countries

The Philippines has been a gainer from developments since 11 September 2001. A traditional security ally of the US, the Philippine-US security relationship was strengthening even before 11 September. For instance, the Visiting Forces Agreement in 1999 provided the legal framework for the conduct of Balikatan (“shoulder to shoulder”) exercises under the Mutual Defence Treaty. But 11 September and the strong support by Manila to the US anti-terror campaign boosted bilateral relations as well as security cooperation. Manila has been permitting US naval ships and military aircraft on the way to the conflict areas in Central/South Asia to refuel in the Philippines. Manila also allowed the US to send special forces and other troops into the southern Philippines to not only train Philippine troops for the fight against the Abu Saayaf rebels, but also to provide tactical intelligence and advice. US troops will continue to be deployed on a rotational basis for exercises and training with Philippine forces under the Balikatan series of exercises. A planned new bilateral logistics agreement will provide greater access to base facilities in the Philippines for US forces.

The Philippines seemed set to reap considerable material benefits for this support. In November 2001, during President Arroyo’s visit to Washington, the US offered about US\$100 million in military and economic aid as well as US\$ 1 billion worth of trade benefits.² The Philippines military, which badly needs modernization, will gain from the closer cooperation.

Singapore, which has also strongly supported the American anti-terrorist campaign, enjoyed a close strategic relationship with the US even before 11 September. After 11 September, it has provided logistic and other support for the increasing number of US planes and warships transiting through Singapore, including, it is reported, air-to-air refueling and facilities for aircraft carriers at Changi naval base. It became the first country outside North America to sign up for the US Customs Container Security Initiative (CSI) which will see American customs officers stationed at Singapore’s port to work with Singapore Customs for screening and tracking of US-bound containers. Singapore took firm action against domestic extremists linked to international terrorism, as seen in the arrests of Jemaah Islamiah elements here in January 2002. The threat from international terrorism has become a primary security concern for the Republic. Singapore feels vulnerable because of its strategic alignment with the US, the many US facilities in the island republic, its small size and high population density, and its close proximity to other Muslim countries from clandestine where terrorist cells could potentially operate against Singapore.

Malaysia. Malaysia has been a net gainer. After 11 September, Malaysia said it would cooperate fully with the US in the anti-terror war. It had been facing the problem of militant

Islam at home (arrests of KMM elements had been made in May 2001, even before 11 September), and it wanted to demonstrate to foreign investors that it was not a haven for terrorists. In December 2001 and January 2002, 23 more Muslim militants were arrested. This group, dubbed "KMM2" was apparently closely connected with Jemaah Islamiah. Malaysia also has close intelligence cooperation with the US and other governments on the terrorist threat.

The result has been great improvement in Malaysia-US relations from the lows reached in 1998-2000 (mainly because of Dr Mahathir's perceived treatment of his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim). He was warmly welcomed in the White House earlier this year as a moderate Muslim leader.

In domestic politics, Dr Mahathir has consolidated support for the ruling coalition, the Barisan National, among the non-Malay population who fear Islamic extremism. However it is not clear how much Malay support UMNO has recovered as a result of events since 11 September ---- probably not much, at least not in the northern states of the peninsula, judging by the by-elections in the state of Kedah in July 2002.

Indonesia.

For Indonesia, the effect of the events since 11 September on the political and economic climate has on balance been negative.

Indonesia's support for the American-led anti-terror campaign has been less forthcoming. The reason for this is primarily domestic politics. Since the exit of former President Suharto and the democratization of politics, Muslim political forces have been able to organise and propagate their views without restrictions. They have become an important factor in the political equation, especially with presidential elections due in 2004. Further, over the past decade and a half, a revival of Islamic fervour has been underway, with many Muslims, formerly only nominal Muslims, taking the religion more seriously, so that the division between the *abangans* and the *santris* today is not as it was in the 1970s or even 1980s. This had to do with the revival of Islam worldwide after the clout demonstrated by Arab countries in 1973 in using the oil weapon, the consequent increase of funds from Saudi Arabia to Muslim religious and social organizations in various parts of the world, the successes of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan and, important in Indonesia's case, Suharto's own efforts from late 1980s to win the support of Muslims by raising the profile of Islam in the country.

When President Megawati visited the US soon after 11 Sept 2001, she was reported to have promised support for President Bush's anti-terrorist campaign and in return Indonesia was promised considerable economic support. But the domestic situation in Indonesia was such that, on returning home, she found that she could not take firm action as the US president, and neighboring countries like Singapore and Malaysia, expected. Her own Vice-President, Hamzah Haz, leader of Muslim based United Development Party (PPP) has shown open sympathy to the militants---it is said because of his political ambitions for the 2004 elections.

In recent months, however, there have been some signs of a firmer stance. In January 2002, Indonesia extradited a terrorist suspect to Egypt, with the assistance of US intelligence. In April 2002 Indonesian intelligence helped the Philippines to arrest Agus Dwikarna who had allegedly operated a training camp in Central Sulawesi (now closed) for Al Qaeda. In May Umar Thalib, the leader of the Laskar Jihad militia involved in attacks against Christians in the Moluccas, was arrested for a second time and was going to be put on trial for undermining a government-

brokered peace settlement in Ambon between Christians and Muslims. There are regular intelligence exchanges on counter-terrorism with the US and with neighboring countries.

Still, Indonesia's cooperation in the anti-terror war remains limited. Bashir and his JI people are still at large. Some of those who escaped arrest in Malaysia and Indonesia could also be in Indonesia. The whereabouts of Hambali, an Indonesian national, are not known.

This state of affairs is likely to persist because, in Indonesia's democratic politics, Islam will remain an important force, making it difficult for political leaders to act firmly. Indonesia's legal, judicial and law enforcement systems are weak as its general governance. To the US and to Indonesia's neighbors, these flaws, combined with the country's geography--- a vast archipelago whose borders would be difficult to police even in the best of circumstances--- make Indonesia a potential haven for Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda linked extremist groups, even though there is no evidence so far of substantial Al Qaeda presence in the country.

Conclusion.

The past year since 11 September has seen an assertion of US power in Central, South and Southeast Asia. This, combined with the closer alignment of Russia with the West, seems to have transformed the geopolitical map of Asia. However, uncertainties abound. While Al Qaeda has been damaged, it is said to still possess the capability to mount terrorist attacks, including against the US. The relief felt by many over its setbacks is mixed with unease because of its known desire to seek and use weapons of mass destruction and also because the war against terrorism would be a long drawn out one. A possible US military attack on Iraq with its attendant risks not only for the US, and for the global economy, through oil price volatility, but also for its effects on the war against terrorism, adds to the sense of uncertainty.

How much of a threat international terrorism poses to Southeast Asia depends on the global fortunes of Al Qaeda and the threat from possible undetected "sleepers" in Southeast Asia, especially operatives hiding in Indonesia, notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of Indonesian people are moderate Muslims who would not want to have anything to do with terrorism. Southeast Asian networks can proceed with autonomous operations, without prior approval from Al Qaeda, though Al Qaeda professionals are likely to be required to carry out the more sophisticated operations.

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