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Counterterrorism: ASEAN Militaries' Growing Role

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Following its defeat in Iraq and Syria last year the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) has expanded to other parts of the Muslim world including Southeast Asia by linking up with local militant groups. Countries in the region recognise the need for stronger cooperation in counter-terrorism and are increasingly roping in their militaries.

Commentary

FOLLOWING THE shrinking of its battle space in Iraq and Syria, the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS) is expanding worldwide, including to Southeast Asia. Against the backdrop of the rising terrorist threat, Singapore as chair of ASEAN will host a series of meetings to discuss the renewed threat and enhance the region's counter-terrorism cooperation to tackle it. Last week, Singapore hosted the 15th ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting to discuss ways to build capacity and strengthen practical regional cooperation.

The ASEAN defence ministers who had met earlier at their retreat in Singapore on 6 February 2018 identified terrorism as the single biggest threat to the region, even as they recognised several other regional security challenges, ranging from the troubled South China Sea to the North Korea issue. In a joint statement following the retreat, the ministers noted: "Terrorism is a severe threat to ASEAN's progress, prosperity and very way of life."

Region's Unpreparedness

Although the traditional role for fighting terrorism is with the law enforcement authorities, with the escalation in threat, the military forces today play vital front-line and support roles, ranging from direct action to intelligence gathering. Southeast

Asia's military forces, law enforcement authorities and national security agencies are assessing the impact of IS transforming from a caliphate-building group to a global terrorist movement.

Despite its defeat in Mosul, Iraq, in July and in Raqqa, Syria, in October last year, IS is evolving into a transnational terrorist movement by linking up with local groups and expanding into other parts of the Muslim world, including to Asia, which hosts 63 per cent of the Muslim population. In Southeast Asia alone, 63 groups pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and they are resistant to government action.

With its continuous recruitment both in the real and virtual spaces, IS will be able to sustain itself drawing support from thousands of supporters and sympathisers to mount sporadic bombing, assassinations, ambushes and other forms of hit-and-run attacks.

The threat in Southeast Asia is an extension of the developments in South Asia and the Middle East. The siege of Marawi in the Philippines demonstrated how unprepared the region was to the rising threat of IS. Although Marawi was initially identified as an intelligence failure, stronger leadership and operational capabilities could have helped to recognise and appreciate the threat of IS in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN's Response

Since the advent of IS, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have suffered from terrorism. Plots to attack Singapore have been thwarted. With the relocation and return of foreign fighters and the flow of propaganda, funds and technology, the scale, magnitude and complexity of the terrorist threat in the region continue to grow and deepen.

Countries in the region recognise the need for stronger cooperation in counter-terrorism. It is commendable that several regional counter-terrorism initiatives have been proposed, such as the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement in the Sulu Sea by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines; and Indonesia's Our Eyes initiative to improve information-sharing for counter-terrorism in the region.

To help optimise resources and increase the region's collective counter-terrorism capabilities, Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen proposed a 3R (Resilience, Response and Recovery) framework to guide regional efforts and cover the full range of actions that countries can take.

Resilience, Response and Recovery

The 3Rs will build up the region's resilience to deter and prevent terrorist attacks, such as through information-sharing initiatives and countering extremist narratives; to enhance ASEAN's responses to address terrorism through capacity-building and operational initiatives; and to recover from terrorist attacks and prevent the spread of radicalisation in areas significantly affected by terrorism, such as Marawi, a city besieged by IS for six months.

The threats will include not only those from conventional terrorism but also niche chemical, biological and radiological threats by terrorist groups and rogue states.

It is thus useful that Singapore, as ADMM chair this year, proposed concrete initiatives -- the establishment of a virtual ASEAN network of chemical, biological and radiological (CBR) defence experts, and an information-sharing workshop among ASEAN armies this year. The CBR network will improve the region's ability to respond to such threats and help CBR defence experts to build up ways to share information and best practices and establish quick contact in crises.

Unless the guardians of security in the region move from counter-terrorism cooperation to collaboration, the threat of ideological extremism and its operational manifestations -- insurgency and terrorism -- will persist. Given these developments, the meetings in Singapore among the defence, intelligence and operations chiefs of the armed forces of Southeast Asia are an opportunity for them to reaffirm the ASEAN militaries' role and commitment to strengthening practical cooperation on counter-terrorism, and cannot be more timely.

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