



RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU.

These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print. However due recognition must be given to the author and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. For more information on this, please do not hesitate to call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor of the Commentaries.

The Threat of WMD Terrorism: ASEAN Needs to Respond

*Rajesh M. Basrur**

6 June 2007

In 2004, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1540 to counter the threat of terrorists obtaining weapons of mass destruction (WMD). All states are required to adopt legal and administrative measures to meet the threat. However, progress has been slow in Southeast Asia, with Singapore being an exception. There are several reasons for this. First, most states in the region do not consider WMD terrorism a significant threat as there has been no sign of its appearance over the years. Second, many states suffer from paucity of resources, technical knowledge and experience. Third, there is resistance in the region to priorities and measures being imposed on them under Chapter VII of the UN Charter which is backed by the possibility of sanctions being imposed for non-compliance. This goes against the grain of the ASEAN way, which prefers consensus on identifying problems and solutions. And fourth, there is resentment that major powers have set an agenda which identifies only part of the problem while ignoring the obligation of the Nuclear Weapons States to disarm.

Is the threat serious enough to override political inhibitions? Arguably, the threat of WMD terrorism does appear to be receding in Southeast Asia. Terrorist groups appear increasingly focused on local issues and their links with the major centres of terrorist violence in South and West Asia are arguably tenuous. However, the term WMD is misleading because it encourages us to think of high levels of technical sophistication. In fact, crude WMD in conjunction with conventional explosives are not difficult to produce, and materials – especially chemicals and radioactive substances – are widely available. These can have far-reaching effects as the spread of unseen materials like gas and radiation can produce panic and unpredictable mass responses. Though these are weapons of mass *disruption* rather than destruction, they do still have the potential to produce significant negative physical and political effects.

Current trends point to the seriousness of the threat. The WMD threshold was crossed in Iraq in February 2007 with the use of hybrid weapons combining conventional explosives with chlorine gas. Such attacks have been subsequently repeated. The use of WMD has been ideologically justified by jihadi ideologues and instructions for producing such weapons are freely available on the internet. Though these instructions are elementary and do not go far in helping to produce truly destructive weapons, they can be used to manufacture makeshift WMD with considerable disruptive potential. Terrorists anywhere can access these instructions and may be “inspired” by the crossing of the WMD threshold in Iraq. Another notable development has been the *outflow* of terrorist money and personnel from Iraq. According to intelligence reports, Al-Qaeda’s base in Pakistan is being strengthened by such flows. Thus, disturbingly, the possibility of similar flows reaching Southeast Asia cannot be ruled out.

Some states have sought technical and financial assistance for the implementation of Resolution 1540. But a major obstacle may be gaps in understanding between providers – often developed states with strong legal and technical infrastructures and resources – and developing countries – many lacking resources and technical knowledge. Specific problems are likely to be contextual, i.e., relevant to local conditions. ASEAN can tackle such problems effectively because its members are knowledgeable about regional conditions and constraints and because they are accustomed to collaboration over a long period of time. As such, ASEAN should establish a working group to discuss and resolve issues of common concern and provide assistance to states requiring technical (including legal) assistance. This would be similar to the ad hoc working group established at the Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter-Terrorism in February 2004. The group could share experiences, formulate models for best practices, develop a data base on legislative and administrative measures, and facilitate more effective intelligence exchanges. Singapore, which has been relatively successful in the implementation process, could play a leadership role in intra-regional outreach and as a link between the developed states and the region.

The Resolution's objectives could also be better pursued by extending its ambit within the scope of the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism of January 2007. Apart from the existing ASEAN data base on terrorism and crime, which is now being linked to Interpol, and a data base on best practices, it would be useful to have a continuous arrangement for the exchange of WMD-related information. Notification of inter-state movement of material, accidents, and cases of orphaned material as well as intelligence on criminal and/or terrorist activity relating to WMD could be shared.

Another area of importance is the role of the medical, research and development and industrial sectors, which possess WMD-related materials. Most of these are not well secured. It is imperative that, in addition to imposing legislative and administrative requirements on them, governments should involve them in building awareness of risks, threats and preventive measures and in the creation of a security culture among them.

Southeast Asia has begun to develop a joint disaster management mechanism. This seems to be focused mainly on natural crises such as tsunamis, earthquakes and floods. While many of the organisational aspects of responding to natural calamities and to WMD terrorism may be common, there are crucial differences. For instance, first responders to WMD-related crises require special equipment and training. It would be useful to include WMD-disaster management in the agenda with a dedicated task force at the national and regional levels.

Underlying political divergences cannot be ignored. Conflicting political perceptions inevitably lead to the dilution of joint undertakings. Southeast Asian nations are caught between conflicting preferences for combating terrorism and keeping big power pressures at bay. On the other side, the major powers, no matter how firmly in concert, cannot enforce compliance of a set of measures that requires the initiative, cooperation and political will of a large number of states. Accordingly, it is important to find a meeting ground for these opposing viewpoints. Southeast Asia needs to give serious consideration to the threats it may face in the long term. The major powers must acknowledge the concerns of the lesser ones and pay greater attention to building consensus. One way to strengthen the approach would be to supplement Resolution 1540 through a more broad-based United Nations framework. This is already being done through a series of conventions. But these are general in their construction. It is time to move towards more focused but universalistic agreements.

* *Rajesh M. Basrur is a Visiting Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*