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New US Strategy for Counterterrorism: Implications for Southeast Asia

By Jessica Trisko Darden

Synopsis

President Trump's new National Strategy for Counterterrorism recognises the weaknesses of relying solely on military force and calls for increased effort to prevent terrorism through non-military means and burden-sharing. It identifies "radical Islamist terrorist groups" as the principal US terrorist enemies, potentially distancing allies.

Commentary

THE WHITE House's new National Strategy for Counterterrorism expands on the December 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which identified "Jihadist terrorist organisations" as the most dangerous threat to the US. The new strategy reiterates many of the priorities identified in the National Security Strategy, but advocates a more balanced approach that incorporates both military and non-military tools as well as non-traditional partners, including civil society and the private sector.

Like much of President Trump's America First agenda, both documents emphasise the need to encourage strong partners to share the burden of the counterterrorism mission. The new counterterrorism strategy also demonstrates that US policy is being pulled in opposite directions.

Conflicting Paths?

One element of the strategy doubles down on a Cold War-style battle against what it describes as a nefarious, totalitarian ideology that challenges the American way of life. Another part of the strategy emphasises the prevention of terrorism and the need to build a broader counterterrorism coalition. These two perspectives on

counterterrorism, especially as they relate to civilian counterterrorism tools, are difficult to reconcile.

The Trump counterterrorism strategy is frank in acknowledging that the prevention of terrorism and counterterrorism itself since the September 11, 2001 attacks have produced mixed results and that a new approach is crucial. For both prevention and counterterrorism to succeed, the strategy supports the use of all elements of national power.

Specifically, the strategy “prioritises a broader range of non-military capabilities, such as our ability to prevent and intervene in terrorist recruitment, minimise the appeal of terrorist propaganda online, and build societal resilience to terrorism”. As a result, civilian government institutions and civil society feature prominently.

Evaluating the New US Strategy

America’s over-reliance on military tools has undermined its ability to forestall future threats. In relying more on civilian counterterrorism tools, the strategy recognises that the factors used to measure success must change. The annual, evidence-based strategic assessments discussed in the strategy may also provide an opportunity for outside experts and civil society to weigh in on the effects of US counterterrorism policies. These are all positive developments.

One weakness of the strategy is its inability to fully acknowledge the implications of relying less on the military. In arguing that “[t]hese [terrorist] groups stoke and exploit weak governance, conflict, instability and longstanding political and religious grievances to pursue their goal,” the strategy highlights what civilian-led counterterrorism approaches have long identified as some of the root causes of terrorism.

Yet the strategy itself does not discuss how the US government will work to address these challenges through foreign assistance programmes or other tools. Instead, it swiftly moves on to an extended discussion of refugees and border security that seems distant from the on-the-ground challenges that the US and its partners face in countering violent extremism.

In another example, the strategy argues that terrorists “thrive in countries with weak governments and where disenfranchised populations are vulnerable to terrorists’ destructive and misinformed narratives”. This statement acknowledges the reality of government-driven grievances, such as human rights abuses and political marginalisation, while simultaneously attributing mobilisation to slick marketing strategies by terrorist groups.

If the administration’s strategy is to succeed, the grievances of disenfranchised populations need to be taken seriously. Foreign assistance and other civilian tools need to be leveraged to enable governments and civil society to respond effectively to these grievances before terrorist groups recruit and radicalise individuals. Without a coherent and coordinated interagency response, terrorists will continue to exploit and intensify local conflicts over the distribution of resources and power to gain support.

Overemphasising the Battle of Ideas

The greatest shortcoming of the new national strategy for counterterrorism is its excessive focus on ideology and the identification of “radical Islamist terrorist groups” as an existential threat to the US. Confronting this threat is framed as a new Cold War in which the US “will defeat our enemies, just as we have defeated the purveyors of oppression, fascism, and totalitarianism in previous wars” Although the threat that ISIS- and al-Qaeda-linked movements pose should not be underestimated — as recently demonstrated in Surabaya, Indonesia and Marawi, Philippines — the strategy’s overarching emphasis on Islamism is problematic for several reasons.

First, by equating the War on Terror with the Second World War, it overstates the degree of physical threat posed to American citizens and national interests by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. Second, in seeing counterterrorism as part of a broad cultural conflict, it overestimates the impact of propaganda and strategic communications as sources of, and solutions to, terrorist mobilisation. This emphasis contributes to the continued neglect of real grievances that drive much of the terrorism seen in developing countries.

Third, the explicit targeting of Islamist groups is likely to complicate counterterrorism cooperation in many countries. Where Islamist groups play a significant role in the political process, the framing of Islamism as linked to “violent, extreme, and twisted ideologies that purport to justify the murder of innocent victims” is likely to bring pause.

In other countries, the language used in the US counterterrorism strategy could be interpreted as condoning repressive efforts by governments who see their Muslim minority populations as a threat.

A New Approach to Southeast Asia?

The Trump administration’s counterterrorism strategy suggests that the US will intensify its counterterrorism efforts while increasingly narrowing the geographic scope of its activities. It is significant that there is no reference to Southeast Asia as a region, individual countries in the region, or a regional branch of a terrorist group in the strategy.

Governments in Southeast Asia that were once considered important counterterrorism partners may now find themselves with fewer resources as the US deprioritises specific terrorist groups and expands its efforts in cyberspace and the financial sector.

Looking ahead, governments in Southeast Asia should anticipate an increased emphasis from the US on several key issues. First, the US is likely to encourage increased cooperation with other counterterrorism partners to expand monitoring of financial flows and identify transnational terrorist support networks in the region.

Second, US funding for early warning systems, terrorism prevention efforts, and programmes to counter violent extremism may contract throughout the region, even as military cooperation remains strong. Finally, improved relations and cooperation

between the security sector and civil society actors is likely to be a feature of civilian counterterrorism assistance in the region.

Southeast Asian governments should not expect a radical change in US counterterrorism policy, but instead a creeping retrenchment as the Trump administration continues to put America First.

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