

## **An Analysis of Existing Threats**



# Transnational Security Challenges in Southeast Asia: Departing from a Crossroads?

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The core problem of contemporary international security affairs is the informal and transnational nature of security threats and risks. Scope, organization and actions of so-called 'new security threats' go beyond the realms of a nationally bound state system, and therefore transcend conventional conceptions of international organization, public legislation and security. This is not a challenge solely for Southeast Asia, but for all nations on a global scale. The most recent military response of the United States to the terrorist attacks of September 11 and to the spread of weapons of mass destruction has not brought about the intended increase of stability, as the ambiguous results of wars against Afghanistan and Iraq have shown. The international community is far from possessing convincing strategies to tackle risks to security properly. Strategies that are derived from the global impact of interacting fundamentalism, authoritarian rule, privatization of force and eroding nation-state structures are lacking. Therefore, the challenge we are dealing with is neither a regional one, nor one of cooperation among nation states.

Be that as it may, the Southeast Asian region has emerged as one of the main global focal points of new security concern and has therefore gained major attention in international security considerations, for

instance within the European Union. Last year's incidents in the Philippines, Malaysia and particularly in Indonesia disclosed the inter-relationship between global and regional security threats, and point toward the need for a cross-regional requirement for developing mutually corresponding and coherent strategies of crisis and risk prevention.

The regional arrangements and principles of coexistence in Southeast Asia, especially those among member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), may have suited the nation-state-dominated world of the past and arguably still play an important role in the handling of domestic political tasks and challenges. However, as Joseph Nye has pointed out, today it is commonplace that no single state is capable of tackling these problems alone.<sup>1</sup> Cooperation among states is no longer a liberal ideal, but a factual necessity.

Due to the need for swift action, the traditional resistance in Southeast Asia to multilateral institutionalization at the expense of state sovereignty has gradually given way to pragmatism and cooperation in justice and home affairs. Southeast Asian states have long been standing at a crossroads and the substantial transformations in security affairs might have a lasting impact. Previous hesitation

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1. Joseph S. Nye, 'Redefining the National Interest', *Foreign Affairs* 4(78) (1999).

in manifesting active multilateral security cooperation and perhaps institutional set-ups might be abandoned in favour of new attitudes, which adjust to this new condition. However, it should be stressed that the question for active regional cooperation is not necessarily a formal one, and therefore tantamount to the making of a regional order. Institutionalization of regional cooperation is not of primary importance, and issue-related cooperation might be accompanied by advances in confidence building. This paper will deal with crucial questions and issues in contemporary security affairs, and in this context tentatively discuss the consequences of dealing with transnational security challenges.

After the dissolution of Cold War international security structures, the field of security affairs became increasingly complex. The degree of inter-relationship and structural complexity of potential security risks has increased and so have efforts to adjust existing national and multilateral institutions and policies. However, shortcomings are evident in both the political and academic communities in the area of redefining the scope and the nature of these risks.

Firstly, after a bout of outdated bipolar explanations, practices of the Cold War international order became redundant and a structural vacuum emerged, which left scope for new ways of describing the world in which formerly existing external constraints on states were factually lifted. While expectations were raised of a new World Order based on the rule of law, it quickly became clear that this would pave the way for democratic pluralism, economic prosperity and sustainable development within the community of nations. However, in a globalizing world, trends of integration would accelerate as well as trends of fragmentation.

Secondly, it has been argued that formerly postponed/protracted intra-state conflicts over issues of self-determination had come to the fore, since the Cold War necessity of domestic stability was no longer an imperative to avoid outside intervention. Hardly anyone, especially in the West, however, expected self-determination to become an issue of high pressure for intensified and particularly long-term commitment, including expensive means of peace keeping, peace enforcement and post-conflict rehabilitation.

Thirdly, the rising technological and political possibilities of globalization, which provide for easy access to information and relatively unlimited movement, have given way to new security challenges of a transnational dimension, including new actors. Security, as the traditional domain of states since the peace of Westphalia, has all of a sudden attracted other actors – particularly since governments and international governmental organizations have proven unsatisfactory in being able to maintain control.

The broad spectrum of security issues has also left its mark on Southeast Asia. The financial crisis following 1997 highlighted the limits of a state's capabilities in turning away external influences in a globalized market. Moreover, the disaffection among protesters and in some cases violent outbreaks, especially in Jakarta, demonstrated the need for the human dimension of security. Similarly, ethnic strife in many countries is not only a result of colonial heritage, but also a matter of mobilization and perceived grievances of the disadvantaged, especially in developing and threshold countries. The list of potential security issues is endless, and security affairs are a criss-cross pattern of domestic and international normative agendas, transnational networks, private and state actors, supposed risks and potential threats.

## ***Transnational Security Risks from a Functional Perspective***

What may be called the new international security agenda is in fact composed of a myriad of issues. Not all of them are new, nor can they all be understood as threats. The transnational dimension of security, however, is of striking relevance both in conceptual and practical terms. Conceptually, it clashes with traditional perspectives on security, strategy and defence, not least because new security challenges, often referred to as non-traditional or soft security issues, can no longer be met with state-centred or military-led approaches alone. In practical terms, the issue spectre of security policy is extended to (and integrated into) policy areas, which either did not have security relevance before, or which were traditional domains of other functional policies, such as home affairs, development, trade and the environment. Moreover, formerly domestic and private non-state actors transcend both internationally guaranteed sovereign borders of states, and the state's domestic sovereignty and monopoly of violence. In contrast to truly transnational or global issues, such as environmental degradation or epidemics of endemic diseases, the actor-based approach cannot be precisely located. Therefore, the nexus between internal and external security has become blurred in both directions.

Actors, such as terrorists, are operating across borders, organizing themselves transnationally, and are involved in activities that used to be exclusively internal security issues. International crime, which is not an entirely novel phenomenon, is enjoying a renaissance in security affairs, since politically motivated groups in all probability finance themselves this way. However, in security affairs we can make out two types of relevant transnational actors. Whereas the motivation of most political groups can usually still be found within the originating society – though there is a tendency for it to be subject to change – criminal actors, involved in financial crimes such as money laundering, piracy and human, arms or drug trafficking, operate transnationally. The difference lies in the fact that politically motivated actors usually need a cause for mobilization and a particular circumstance which they aspire to change. This can be the *status quo*, the entire set-up of a society on the basis of an ideology, or a call for justice as a reaction to felt grievances.<sup>2</sup> The means is usually to attack civil society and the integrity of the state, which in turn remains a crucial agency in transnational security affairs.

### ***Pitfalls***

The danger of misinterpretation and political utility lies, *inter alia*, in the lack or impossibility of proper definitions in contemporary security affairs. The global concern with terrorism since September 2001 has made it easier to label all sorts of groups as terrorist organizations and to criminalize them internationally. On the

conceptual side, the insufficient distinction between security risks and threats can have all sorts of practical consequences. These are mainly found in policy outcomes. In security usage, the terms 'risk' and 'threats' are all too often insufficiently differentiated.

2. The widespread polarization against the United States can be seen in this context, because the American presence through military and economic aid, as well as political support is often regarded as an obstacle to societal change.

A risk in most cases presupposes an action which might have unintended consequences. Similarly, a state of affairs which, if left ignored, might develop disadvantageously, or an action which is undertaken or omitted despite the knowledge that it might – although not necessarily – have certain consequences, constitutes a risk.

Threats are either a matter of direct confrontation or of perception. In transnational security, a risk can only be explained as a tolerated vulnerability. In contrast to threats, vulnerability is an actual condition, which can nevertheless have an impact on threat perception. States can either reduce this risk by reducing vulnerabilities or by preventing threats. Whereas the first option means a reduction in the vulnerabilities of the state itself, the latter seeks to reduce threat by addressing the sources.<sup>3</sup> For instance, vulnerabilities can be reduced in a reactive way by setting high security standards, improving means

of defence or directly targeting the supposed origin of a threat. The potential of the latter, however, does not necessarily disappear. Addressing the sources of a threat means to proactively deal with actors, issues and root causes, which lead to a certain conflictual situation.

The main problem is how threats are perceived and what is believed to be a threat. Threat perception can be generated through scenarios and potential links, which do not necessarily exist as such in the real world. The sense of vulnerability makes political mobilization possible, and policy makers are benefactors in so far as upcoming policies can be easily legitimized. The link between transnational organized crime, such as piracy, all kinds of trafficking, or money laundering, which endangers world-wide interests, and terrorism has in particular lifted the risk perception to the level at which a threat probability does admittedly exist, but the potential threat is not clear.

### ***The Regional Interregnum: Political Challenges and Regional Peculiarities***

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In his provocative piece on the supposed peculiarities of Asian security, Gerald Segal has pointed out that any emphasis of this kind has been nothing but 'ethnic chic'.<sup>4</sup> His accusations may be harsh, but there is a kernel of truth in his elaborations. Indeed, there is nothing specifically Asian about Asian security. The transformations and issues at stake are not too different from those that have appeared in the long history of European conflicts and its process of integration.

The visions and principles of the founding fathers of ASEAN and the European Coal

and Steel Community (ECSC)/European Community (EC)/European Union (EU) were similarly rooted in a specific security concern. Nevertheless, there were different conditions and motivations in the setting up of each of these two regional organizations. The states of Europe, which had experienced two major wars, were functionally bound in order to interdependently engage in a common market. The Southeast Asian states, which, with few exceptions, had a common colonial heritage, ethnic or ideological divisions and the task of state building ahead, indeed had a different starting point.

3. See also Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 112ff.

4. Gerald Segal, 'What is Asian about Asian Security?', in *Unresolved Futures – Comprehensive Security in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. by Jim Rolfe (Wellington: Centre for Strategic Studies, 1995), p. 107.

Whereas the European task was to find reconciliation within the existing post-war state system, in Southeast Asia state building was at the top of the agenda. The independence of many states coincided with the beginning of the Cold War, with its defence perimeters and domino theories. Hence, they were better advised to insist on such principles as non-interference, sovereignty and peaceful coexistence maintained through dialogue, rather than becoming involved in strategies of mutual interdependence other than economy. One can argue that during the Cold War this cooperation-based rather than integration-based system, at least on the inter-state level, made it possible to keep the peace, avoid major cleavages and keep internal conflicts in check.

Ironically, meanwhile, many of the security issues, which had formerly been dealt with as internal affairs, have turned transnational themselves, making the principle of non-interference, or at least its initial purpose, close to irrelevant. With it, a multitude of new actors, problems and political challenges have emerged, which will have a lasting impact on regional security arrangements. Dealing with those transnational actors whose activities had formerly been confined to the domestic sphere of nation-state building, such as ethnic separatist groups or power-seeking religious fundamentalists, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it might be tempting for policy makers to stigmatize groups that use violent means as terrorists in order to legitimize their own methods internationally. On the other hand, the acceptance that these actors are now operating transnationally means accepting that they are no longer operating in the realm of domestic security affairs, which poses the danger of outside interference. In extreme cases, states that are suspected

of harbouring or being the country of origin of transnational criminals or terrorists are prone to outside intervention.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has repeatedly confirmed the need for a multilateral security dialogue and cooperation in the region. The non-institutionalized forum character of the ARF and the regionally typical careful form of diplomacy, including a multi-track dialogue, has led malicious critics to state that despite all good will practical realizations are still lacking. In fact, the ARF can only give out recommendations and encourage its members to cooperate multilaterally.<sup>5</sup> It cannot make binding decisions itself. The degree of multilateral institutionalization, or resistance to it, is a main point of controversy. However, it also reflects the diversity of actors within the region, the unclear power relations and the fear that particular actors might become too influential and that confidence building within the region has not yet reached an advanced stage.

All in all, we are witnessing two conflicting trends. On the one hand, the *status quo* of inter-state relations remains untouched for the sake of gradual international development. On the other hand, new security threats make cooperation across borders inevitable. As mentioned before, the new security situation makes states increasingly vulnerable to outside intervention. Policy makers need to perform a balancing act between traditional suspicion of outside intervention and actual necessity. In fact, concerted efforts in security affairs are a measure to avoid this, and are therefore a strong argument for multilateral arrangements. Similarly, the question of whether major powers will try to interfere or attempt to widen their sphere of influence in regional affairs

5. See for example the ASEAN Regional Forum Statement on cooperative counter-terrorist action on border security, <http://www.waseansec.org/14836.htm>, p. 5.

depends on whether or not states actively take the initiative into their own hands. Besides, active cooperation in justice and home affairs might prove to be a better means of confidence building than economic functionalism.

Within Southeast Asia, and especially in ASEAN member states, practices of cooperation, which not too long ago were

considered out of reach, have already become a matter of daily life. Under the pressure of a changing environment and transforming challenges – both domestic and cross-border – the handed-down diplomatic protocol may yet become subject to change. In that respect, tackling new security issues may also provide a political chance.

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### Issues and Scenarios

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Since the Cold War, the security situation in Southeast Asia, in comparison to Europe or other parts of Asia, has not crucially changed. With the breakdown of bipolar security structures, old prevailing conflicts came to the fore. What had changed were the new possibilities of free international movement and the flow of information and communication, which, among other things, made possible a different operational basis for security relevant actors on a transnational level. In contrast to traditional explanations, where 'inter-state violence was the central criterion for distinguishing security threats from other categories of conflict',<sup>6</sup> the

extended security concept extensively widened the spectrum of international security concern and relevant factors. The transnational security agenda can be divided into three categories: politically motivated violence, such as terrorism; transnational criminal activity, such as money laundering, trafficking of all kinds, or piracy; and issue-related security concerns, such as environmental and health problems (e.g. El Niño, SARS). In the following sections a few examples of security challenges relevant to Asia in particular are outlined, along with counter-measures that are already being implemented (where applicable).

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### Terrorism

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After September 11 the term 'terrorism' gained an inflationary use. Often the definition of what terrorism is and isn't leaves a wide scope for interpretation. Secessionist movements all over the world that are striving for self-determination in states are often labelled as terrorist. Although these movements make use of terrorist methods again and again in order to achieve their goals, clear distinctions should be made. Terrorist organizations, in the first instance, are seeking to challenge the *status quo*, be it in the form of a political system or an ideology. On

the other hand, it has become increasingly evident that Southeast Asia has become an important arena for transnational actors such as the Al Qaeda terrorist network, which may have established contacts in Southeast Asia as early as 1988.

Within Southeast Asia, the main terrorist groups are the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG – committed to the creation of an Islamic state in Southern Philippines) and the Jeemah Islamiyah (JI – committed to the creation of an Islamic state in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Southern

6. Emil Kirchner and James Sperling, 'The New Security Threats in Europe: Theory and Evidence', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 7 (2002), 423.



Philippines).<sup>7</sup> The ASG is a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front and therefore has its roots in the secessionist movement. It reportedly receives support from the Middle East and South Asia, and gained major popularity after kidnapping tourists in Malaysia. The JI has been held responsible for the recent bombings in Kuta, Bali and at the Marriot Hotel in Jakarta. The group is said to have direct links to Al Qaeda, which may also have operational contacts in Thailand, and to the Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM). ASG and JI operate transnationally, although their goals are mainly domestically oriented. According to the findings of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), terrorist activities are most often closely linked with organized crime, examples of which are drug production and trafficking, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, bank robberies, fraud, illicit gambling, smuggling and trafficking in counterfeit goods, firearms, fundraising of private or state sponsored donations, sale of publications, and also legitimate and illegitimate business

activities. The links may differ, however, from case to case and from country to country.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, networks which need to be dealt with are not confined simply to illegal combatants, but also include different layers of societies and transnational activities.

As a reaction to this broad security challenge, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT) was founded in 2003. The centre examines the causes and origins of terrorism. The ARF has given out several recommendations for border security, and measures against terrorist financing. Within ASEAN, efforts have been made by the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANPOL) to foster common capacity building in counter-terrorism in the policing sector. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have signed an agreement on information exchange in order to combat international crime and terrorism. Several nations have adopted or modified counter-terror laws.

### Piracy

Piracy has been a long-standing specific problem in the coastal regions of Southeast Asia and Africa. It recently gained major attention since terrorist activities are usually financed through transnational criminal activity. In fact, piracy is a problem for financial interests in the import and export business and a major threat to maritime safety on busy trading routes, including the Malacca Strait. In the first quarter of 2003, 92 attacks were reported

in the waters of Asia Pacific. Whereas separatist groups such as the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) are said to partly finance themselves through piracy, no serious links have become evident between piracy and terrorism. Since June 2003, ARF participants have committed themselves to cooperate more closely with maritime safety and with the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

### Migration/Human Trafficking

Migration as a transnational security issue is not a recent phenomenon. However, for

receiving countries it is often not just a security issue. The manner in which they tackle

7. Sources: The United States Department of State and the Home Office of the United Kingdom.

8. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, Draft Memorandum No. 7: *The Relationship between Terrorism and Transnational Crime* (2001), [http://www.2.yuw.ac.nz/css/docs/cscap\\_reports/Memo7.html](http://www.2.yuw.ac.nz/css/docs/cscap_reports/Memo7.html).

migration hints at existing hidden agendas which deal with related domestic stability risks, especially those concerning internal security. Migration is a security issue in two ways. Firstly, it is a human security issue because

migration flows are often exploited by criminals for human trafficking. Secondly, migration makes borders more fluid; human mobility enables terrorists to cross borders with greater ease.

### ***Remedies: Tentative Assumptions***

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It is not possible to speak conclusively about remedies in the handling of new security challenges nor are there any blueprints for dealing with actors who are not part of any specific social context. Multilateral cooperation in justice and home affairs, development cooperation and combating transnationally organized crime are conceivable ways to reduce security risks. The degree of institutionalization of such efforts does not necessarily play a decisive role. It may, however, make cooperation more effective and cost-effective when resources are being pooled and concerted actions undertaken. The handling of transnational security is a test of common efforts in Southeast Asian security affairs, and might be accompanied by advances in confidence building.

The problem is that there are no qualitative indicators to measure the security-related effectiveness of the preventive initiatives that are being undertaken, be they in the form of human well-being or the integrity of states and societies. Whereas the latter is a normative question in the broadest sense, which can only be measured with difficulty, the former is a problem of complexity. It might be impossible to find the causalities between measures being taken and actual outcomes, because it is usually the multiplicity of root causes and mechanisms that lead to certain behaviours in actors, and the actual links between potential security risks and threats are not as obvious as they are sometimes portrayed. For instance, dealing with the

root causes of politically motivated violence, such as environmental deprivation or poverty reduction, is not necessarily linked to decreases in violent action. Combating transnational crime and possibly the operational means of 'insecurity actors' might therefore similarly lack such a link. However, the effort as a whole might reduce potential threats. Attention should therefore focus on the kind of measures being undertaken.

States that are confronted with actual security threats are forced into reactive positions and will try everything to limit the damage. Most immediate action which is based on counter-violence and repressive measures will eventually provide politically motivated actors with additional symbolic value. However, long-lasting effects will only be achieved through proactive measures. This means reducing risks sustainable by eliminating the root causes of the conflict, in so far as this is possible. Furthermore, proactive measures entail making use of multilateral action, wherever possible based on the rule of law; risk-reduction in the long run means reducing potential threats. Whether effective counter-measures taken against new security threats and risks result in sustainable institutional arrangements, regional or transregional regimes cannot be answered to in general terms. However, the question of whether the form and organization of one or the other security arrangement is more suitable for this or that particular region is of minor importance.