Political Islam and Counterterrorism In Southeast Asia: An Agenda for US Policy

Since late 2001, after the intervention in Afghanistan, the United States has focused attention on “second fronts” in the war on terrorism, assuming that Al Qaeda would disperse its operatives and resources more widely. Southeast Asia, a region of prime importance during the Cold War, holds both threat and promise. Indonesia, the largest country in the region, is home to more Muslims than all Arab states combined. Southeast Asian Islam has traditionally been moderate, but in the past decade radical Islamists—indigenous and foreign—have made strides both underground and in the public arena.

Washington counts several Southeast Asian governments as military or political allies, but allegiance to the United States is far from automatic. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, American foreign policy centered on other regions. Southeast Asia’s response was to foster greater independence in foreign policy and to balance relations with the United States with stronger ties to other powers, notably China. In this interim, globalization and democratization have made domestic populations more vocal, and they are increasingly critical of US policies. Fearing political consequences, governments are reluctant at times to pursue Islamist radicals, particularly if they are perceived as bowing to US pressure in doing so.

The new US focus on counterterrorism as an organizing principle in foreign policy is a mixed blessing for Southeast Asia. On the one hand, it has returned the region to the US “policy screen.” On the other, it views Southeast Asia in a single dimension—that of Islamic extremism—which can result in unbalanced, even myopic, policies.

Despite these contradictions, counterterrorism cooperation between the United States and Southeast Asia has met with some success. Greater awareness of extremist networks in the region has resulted in tighter law enforcement and the arrest of some key terrorists. At the same time, however, the United States is at risk of encouraging greater radicalism in Southeast Asian Islamist communities with policies that often do not accurately reflect local conditions and concerns.

To address the difficulties of formulating new policies in the post-September 11 era, the Stanley Foundation chose to examine political Islam and counterterrorism in Southeast Asia as one topic in its 44th Strategy for Peace Conference on “New Security Challenges in Southeast and South Asia.” Participants identified specific challenges in the region and formulated recommendations on both paradigm shifts and concrete policy measures.

Policy Challenges

A majority of participants in the roundtable agreed that US counterterrorism policy tends to conflate political Islam and terrorism worldwide. In the words of one participant, “US policy tries to reduce the entire Muslim world to the
In Southeast Asia a connection exists between Islamist extremism and terrorism in some cases, but it is generally narrower and weaker than that found in some other regions, particularly the Middle East. A greater effort is needed to distinguish Muslim political expression from terrorism. Along these lines, participants identified eight challenges in crafting US counterterrorism policy in Southeast Asia:

• Understanding political Islam in Southeast Asia. In the past decade, political Muslims have often been viewed from the outside as part of a global “Algerian dilemma,” a reference to the 1992 election in that country that brought to power an Islamist party (with an insurgent base) that sought to end secular rule. This model assumes that political Muslims are invariably militant. Some participants disagreed and pointed to moderate groups seeking political expression for Islamic issues in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, political Islam is embodied by the opposing Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam SeMalaysia, or PAS). Competing for power in the formal political arena has given PAS a motivation to distance itself from terrorist groups. In Indonesia, political Muslims are generally not driven by Islamic ideology; instead, they are found across a spectrum of parties and often pursue pragmatic policy goals. Radical Islamic parties pose little threat, and failed to win even 3 percent of the vote in the last election.

• Placing Southeast Asia in a global context. Despite the fact that Southeast Asian Islam is broadly a moderate strain, world events have nurtured a global Islamic consciousness among Muslims in the region. Southeast Asians who joined the mujahadin against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s developed ties with radical groups from other regions.

Global media has made Southeast Asians more aware of the plight of Muslims in other areas. As a result, Southeast Asian Muslims are increasingly concerned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among others, and more inclined to subscribe to a need to defend Islam worldwide. The US intervention in Iraq has strengthened this universalist view among Southeast Asian Muslims and damaged the US image in some quarters. Recent polls indicate that approval of the United States has fallen by 75 percent in Indonesia in the past 18 months. One participant maintained that, despite administration insistence that the United States is not waging war against Islam, “The data just doesn’t support that.” The United States has heretofore tended to view Southeast Asia as more parochial in its foreign policy interests and in Islamic issues.

• Plotting the intersection between separatism and terrorism. In counterterrorism policy, Washington is primarily concerned with international groups—particularly those that threaten the United States—while some Southeast Asian governments are faced with security threats from several sources. In Indonesia, there is no evidence to date that the Acehnese separatist group, Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM), has connections to Al Qaeda or other foreign terrorist groups. In Jakarta’s view, however, GAM presents a clear threat to Indonesian internal stability. A different problem is presented by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines. Although the MILF sporadically engages in peace talks with Manila, recent intelligence suggests that the group’s home territory in Mindanao has become “the new Afghanistan”—a training ground for the Jemmah Islamiyah, Southeast Asia’s regional terrorist network. Thus far, the United States has resisted bids from Indonesian and Philippine leaders to
declare both of these groups to be terrorist, although the case of the MILF presents an obvious dilemma.

• **Separating violent radical Islamists from nonviolent ones.** Several participants made a distinction between Islamist radicals in Southeast Asia who support the use of violence and those who do not. It follows that policy should attempt to widen and strengthen that difference, but such a policy—particularly from an external power—is inherently delicate and risky. How can radical nonviolent Muslims be drawn into dialogue and the mainstream political process? Should the United States make direct efforts in this regard, such as identifying nonviolent Muslim radicals for exchange programs, or take a backdoor approach, by supporting indigenous processes that offer alternatives to this group?

• **Dealing with ambiguous institutions, particularly educational systems.** Although some Islamic educational institutions are breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism in Southeast Asia, the majority are not. Nevertheless, their potential to serve this function has prompted Southeast Asian governments to take a variety of approaches. In Indonesia, the pesantren system is incorporated into the state educational system, with curriculum issued by government agencies. It consists of multiple levels and kinds of education. In Malaysia, the state is encouraging students to shift to secular schools. In the Philippines and Thailand, both Muslim-minority countries, religious schools are lacking in resources and tend to be equally inadequate in providing both religious and vocational or academic training.

Participants offered two cautions with respect to Islamic education in Southeast Asia. First, secular schools should be viewed as at least an equal threat, since terrorist groups often recruit from them. Second, a focus on the educational system may be misplaced. Instead, policymakers also need to consider unemployment as a spur to extremism, a problem that is linked to education but not exclusively defined by it.

• **Identifying the most effective actors in Southeast Asian security.** A major dimension in US global policy has been the use of military force to counter terrorism. However, there are few if any terrorist threats in Southeast Asia that are likely to respond to a military solution, particularly one involving foreign troops. The exception has been the Philippines, where US and Philippine armed forces have combined in a joint training exercise to pursue the Abu Sayyaf Group, a small Islamic splinter group reputed to have connections to Al Qaeda. But as in almost everything relating to Southeast Asia, few rules apply across the board. In Malaysia and Singapore, longstanding internal security laws place the police and intelligence agencies automatically in control of counterterrorism. In Indonesia, counterterrorism policy is focused on police but it risks further alienating the armed forces, which have suffered in prestige for the past several years. Participants offered two views on the Philippines: one that a corrupt and inefficient police system made the military option inevitable, the other that the military took credit at times for police work in apprehending terrorists.

• **Understanding and strengthening links between US domestic and foreign policy.** Just as American policies in other regions are increasingly important to Southeast Asian Muslims, so do US domestic policies play a significant, and sometimes negative, role in US relations with Islamic communities in the region. Concern about the treatment of Muslims in the United

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States, particularly with respect to visa and other immigration policies, has caused a growing percentage of Muslims to avoid travel to the United States. An increasing number of Southeast Asian students are choosing to study in Australia rather than the United States.

- **Balancing ownership of the war against terrorism between the United States and Southeast Asia.** The United States is stymied in its relations with Southeast Asia by the broad perception in the region that the war against terrorism is an American one. This impression has been modified in recent months as some Southeast Asian countries have experienced terrorist attacks or made arrests of key extremists and have become more enfranchised in the antiterror campaign as a result. Nevertheless, Southeast Asians frequently criticize the US approach as superficial and concerned primarily with threats to Americans, rather than a deeper commitment that addresses the root causes of extremism and terrorism.

**Recommendations: Changing the Paradigm**

Participants agreed that the more difficult tasks for improving relations with Southeast Asia and counterterrorism policy there lay with changes in US thinking on the region. Improving the conceptual foundation will not only make US policy more effective but will also increase Southeast Asian participation and ownership in the antiterrorism campaign. They offered six recommendations in this regard:

- **Make a new assessment of US policy in Southeast Asia and place counterterrorism issues in context.** The last comprehensive review of official US policy toward Southeast Asia was done in the mid-1990s and focused on the region in the context of broader conventional security threats in the Asia Pacific theater. A comprehensive assessment of US goals and options in the region after September 11 is overdue. When a public diplomacy program is resumed, it should be tailored to Southeast Asian Islam rather than to images of religion in the Middle East or, conversely, of Islam as it is practiced in the United States.

- **Emphasize prevention over preemption.** To stem what were perceived to be immediate threats to security from terrorists, US counterterrorism policy in Southeast Asia has focused primarily on coercive strategies to preempt planned attacks. However, this approach has given exclusive attention to the extremist end of the spectrum in Muslim communities, neglecting the large majority of moderates. A policy that gives greater attention to preventing terrorism will by definition focus more on this “silent majority,” address root causes, and improve the US image in the region.

- **Balance the current emphasis on apprehending individuals with attention to social networks and social policy.** To date, US counterterrorism policy in Southeast Asia has aimed to defeat terrorist groups by decapitating them; that is, apprehending top leaders. This assumes that terrorist networks have vertical hierarchies and chains of command. However, research into Southeast Asian groups, particularly the Jemmah Islamiyah, suggests that these groups are structured in a more horizontal way and based on social and familial relations. In the short term, these networks will meet reductions with replacements, although the quality of these substitutes appears to be declining. Greater attention to local nuances on the sources of terrorist groups will help to weaken these groups further.
• Replace counterterrorism policy with a broader policy to strengthen Southeast Asian domestic security. US policy needs to be widened to incorporate nontraditional security threats of concern to Southeast Asians but are frequently downplayed in US policy. For example, the strategies and tactics used to track and apprehend terrorists can also be applied to the small arms trade and human trafficking. Some de-emphasis of terrorism and Islam could make cooperation between the United States and Southeast Asia easier and benefit counterterrorism as a result.

• Seek a more genuinely regional approach to counterterrorism. As in other areas of policy in Asia (conventional military cooperation, trade), the United States prefers hub-and-spokes arrangements of bilateral relations to a regional approach. However, the fungible nature of terrorism makes it borderless and suggests the need for a stronger regional component to US policy. In the post-September 11 era, Washington has been more willing in principle to consider an ASEAN policy but lacks a concrete strategy for one.

• Plan for a long-term policy and commitment. As they reorient their own policies toward counterterrorism and toward greater cooperation with the United States, many Southeast Asians fear that the United States will lose interest in the region again and turn to other areas with more urgent crises. To address both the preventive and preemptive aspects of counterterrorism, long-term policies and commitments are required not only in counterterrorism but in other aspects of policy central to Southeast Asian concerns.

Recommendations: Changing the Program

Although the policy challenges and conceptual changes discussed above suggest the need for a long-term view of Southeast Asia, all have immediate policy application. Participants identified seven specific initiatives that could have a beneficial effect on US policy in Southeast Asia and US relations with the region.

• Reduce visa and immigrant registration requirements and pay closer attention to their impact on policy. Public diplomacy efforts to demonstrate that the United States respects Islam are negated by immigration policies that categorically target foreign Muslims for suspicion. Moreover, these policies will make it difficult for US policymakers to engage moderate and nonviolent radical Muslims in greater dialogue. Most important, the United States risks losing the support of a generation of young Southeast Asian Muslims who would otherwise choose to study in the United States, sowing the seeds for future waves of radicalism and anti-Americanism.

• Encourage partnerships in educational assistance programs, work with secular as well as religious institutions, and encourage a prototype of Muslim education tailored to the region. US policy is beginning to acknowledge the importance of education in counterterrorism, but it is too narrowly focused on rooting extremists out of the educational system. American assistance programs should take a comprehensive approach to education in select areas, including secular as well as religious institutions. Assistance agencies should seek a partnership arrangement and encourage local design of programs rather than transporting American models and pedagogy. However,
where local leaders indicate it is useful, cross-fertilization of educational methods in the region should be encouraged.

- **Encourage job creation to counter extremism by reexamining US trade policies in the region.** The other side of the educational coin is attention to vocational prospects in significant Muslim populations of Southeast Asia. While there is no proven link between terrorism and poverty—many terrorist leaders are middle or upper middle class—terrorism’s day labor is often the unemployed and disaffected. Specific job creation programs, while well intended, are not likely to reach a critical mass. Reorienting US trade policy in Southeast Asian countries where lifting tariffs would give an economic boost to vulnerable areas would have a broader and more positive impact.

- **Emphasize police over military action against terrorism; in military cooperation programs, strengthen civic action components for armed forces.** In countries such as Indonesia, where police play an increasing role in tracking and apprehending terrorists, providing training and related support helps emphasize that counterterrorism is part of the broader legal and judicial function. In other countries, such as the Philippines, where a military approach has been established, the United States should consider supplemental programs to improve policing. In addition, joint military exercises should have a strong civic action component. This would improve infrastructure in beleaguered areas while it strengthens support for joint maneuvers.

- **Encourage a rule of law renaissance in US assistance, incorporating counterterrorism objectives.** In the 1980s and early 1990s, rule of law programs played a major role in US assistance for democracy promotion. In recent years, they have been downplayed in favor of an emphasis on building civil society. US assistance policies should consider a fresh look at rule of law programs and update them to include counterterrorism and other objectives related to internal security. Maintaining a strong democracy component in these programs will help guard against abuse of internal security laws for political purposes.

- **Strengthen intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asian counterparts with an emphasis on human intelligence.** Moving from a predominant focus on individual terrorists to a broader and more in-depth approach to social trends will require greater intelligence efforts. US intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asia has improved in the post–September 11 period, but more can be done to improve this cooperation with training and greater emphasis on human intelligence on both sides of the Pacific.

- **Encourage dialogue with Southeast Asian governments and publics on US policies in other regions of concern.** While the United States is not likely to make major changes in its Middle East policy to assuage concerns in other regions, it should do more to acknowledge those concerns, privately and publicly. Specifically, the United States should encourage dialogue with Southeast Asian governments and publics on issues central to Muslims in the region, including policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as in Iraq. Southeast Asians feared a unilateralist approach from the United States before counterterrorism became a leading US objective and Southeast Asia regained significance in American foreign policy. In the post–September 11 era, these fears have intensified dramatically.
Southeast Asia has the potential to serve as a model of moderation for the Islamic world and as an example of ways in which old allies can refashion their relations to address new security threats. In recent months, Southeast Asians have been forced by events to confront the rise of extremism in the region and encouraged by the United States to open new areas of cooperation on counterterrorism. To make these policies succeed, however, no less effort is required from the United States to examine its relations with Southeast Asia and to make appropriate policy investments in the region.

Participant List:

Chair
Catharin E. Dalpino, Adjunct Professor, Southeast Asian Studies, Georgetown University and The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University

Rapporteur
Todd Andrews, Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science, The George Washington University

Participants
Zachary Abuza, Associate Professor of Political Science, Simmons College

Azyumardi Azra, Rector, State Islamic University, Indonesia

John J. Bresnan, Adjunct Senior Research Scholar, East Asian Institute, Columbia University

Robin Bush, Director of Programs in Islamic Civil Society, The Asia Foundation

Paul M. Cleveland, President, The United States-Indonesia Society

Donald K. Emmerson, Senior Fellow, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

James L. Huskey, State Department Rusk Fellow, Georgetown University

Karl Jackson, C. V. Starr Distinguished Professor and Director, Asian Studies Program, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The John Hopkins University

R. William Liddle, Professor of Political Science, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, The Ohio State University

Eugene Martin, Executive Director, The Philippine Facilitation Project, United States Institute of Peace

Edward Masters, Cochairman, Board of Trustees, The United States-Indonesia Society

Bronson E. Percival, Counterterrorism Coordinator, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State

Nongnuth Phetcharatana, Deputy Chief of Mission, Royal Thai Embassy

Surin Pitsuwan, Member of Parliament, National Assembly of Thailand

Angel Rabasa, Senior Policy Analyst, RAND

Victor G. Raphael, Chief, Southeast Asian Division, Office of Analysis for East Asia and the Pacific, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State

Santanina T. Rasul, Chairperson, Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc.

Bruce Vaughn, Analyst, Southeast and South Asian Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress

Meredith Weiss, Assistant Professor of International Studies, DePaul University

The Stanley Foundation Staff
Cliff Brockman, Associate Producer, Common Ground
Elizabeth Constantine, Program Officer
Michael Kraig, Program Officer
Jeffrey G. Martin, Vice President and Director of Programs
Susan R. Moore, Conference Management Associate
Richard H. Stanley, President
Leslie Winter, Program Associate

Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. Participants attended as individuals rather than as representatives of their governments or organizations.
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The Stanley Foundation
209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

The Stanley Foundation
209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

The Stanley Foundation
209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

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563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

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209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
info@stanleyfoundation.org

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