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The Jakarta Embassy Bombing

Jemaah Islamiyah's Return?

Felix Heiduk / Kay Möller

The September 9 bomb attack in front of the Australian embassy in Jakarta signals a comeback of the Southeast Asian terror network, Jemaah Islamiyah, that had suffered setbacks in its struggle with Indonesian security forces in 2003 and that some had already pronounced dead. Much as with the March 2004 Madrid train bombings, the timing of the assault prior to Indonesia's presidential and Australia's parliamentary elections betrays an intention to influence democratic processes. In more general terms, both Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been affected by investigative and cooperative deficits that threaten to weaken regional cohesion and to turn Southeast Asia into an object of contention among neighbouring great powers.

On the morning of 9 September 2004, a car bomb exploded outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta. Nine Indonesian citizens were killed and 182 injured. Except for the outer fence, the embassy building itself remained undamaged. On 10 September, the Southeast Asian terror network, Jemaah Islamiyah ("Islamist Group," JI), an organisation that cooperates with Al-Qaeda, accepted the responsibility for the (suicide) attack on an internet website. JI called on all Australians to leave Indonesia. The Canberra government was warned to withdraw its remaining 850 soldiers from Iraq or to expect more assaults. JI concluded by committing itself to a "holy war for the liberation of the land of the Muslims."

This first bomb attack in Indonesia in more than a year came as a shock to all

those who, following the arrest of more than 200 JI members in 2003—among whom was the leading cadre, Riduan Isamuddin (Hambali), in August in Thailand—, had concluded that the group was fragmenting. Whereas American and Australian intelligence services had for some time issued warnings about possible further attacks in Indonesia, they had focussed on "soft" targets such as hotels. The explosive employed on September 9 was identical with the one used during the October 2002 assault on a discotheque in Bali and the August 2003 blast outside the Jakarta Marriott Hotel that left 202 and 12 persons dead, respectively. According to Indonesian and Australian intelligence, JI's explosives expert, Azahari Husin, and another Malaysian citizen were involved

in both cases as well as the recent assault. To the United States, Southeast Asian has been a “second front in the international antiterrorist struggle since January 2002. In 2003, the region provided the setting for 37 percent of all major terrorist attacks launched worldwide, and it has served as a safe haven for about 15 percent of Al-Qaeda’s membership, according to a November 2003 Congressional Research Service report.

What is Jemaah Islamiyah?

Contrasting with local terror organisations in individual Southeast Asian countries, JI is a regional network with about 3,000 members, the basic orientation of which is provided by ideology rather than concrete social interests. The group’s ultimate objective is the creation of an Islamic state consisting of Malaysia, Indonesia, the southern Philippines, as well as possibly Brunei, Singapore, and southern Thailand. All members of the operative leadership were trained in Afghanistan in the late 1980s or early 1990s with financial support from Saudi Arabia. It was also during this time that the organisation established contact with Al-Qaeda that have occasionally been used for a logistical and sometimes tactical cooperation, although JI has been careful to preserve its independence on strategic decision making.

In spite of this independence, Southeast Asia remains an important bridgehead for Al-Qaeda, too. In this context, economic considerations have outweighed the interest in recruitment or local operations. As a hotspot of transnational crime, the region has served as a source of funding for Al-Qaeda’s own criminal activities. During the 1980s, Southeast Asia had been little more than an area for regroupment to bin Ladin’s group without playing a major operative role in Islamic terrorist strategy. It was only when many originally moderate Muslims in the region became the target of an ideological campaign funded, among others, by Saudi Arabia, that the region was

turned into a centre of international terrorism.

JI’s “spiritual” leader is believed to be the Islamic scholar, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, who is presently jailed in Jakarta and due to be charged for supporting terrorist activities. Ba’asyir is one of a very small number of Indonesian clerics who have propagated “holy war” in their religious schools. According to one source, the September 9 attack was meant to bring about his release from prison.

It was with this background of global developments that Southeast Asian terrorism turned transregional during the early 1990s. At that point, sporadic cross-border contacts among radical groups intensified both within and beyond the region. In the mid-1990s, many JI members were trained in Egypt, Yemen, and Pakistan in both ideology and combat. The December 2003 arrest of 13 militants in Karachi, Pakistan, signalled an interest in identifying “safer” locations for recruitment and training. Between 1996 and 2000, JI, together with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), ran a training camp in the southern Philippines. Among the trainees were members of Indonesian terror organisations from places such as South Sulawesi and West Java. Following the 2003 setbacks, some terrorists withdrew to these areas to take part in ethno-religious fighting. At the same time, the main faction was believed to prepare for attacks on “soft” targets such as tourists at a region-wide level.

The attack of September 9 demonstrated that the group, rather than splitting, has (re-) activated a territorial command structure and has been able to redeploy in spite of the security forces’ successes. The assault on the Australian embassy also shows that speculations regarding tactical modifications such as a concentration on sniper attacks have been flawed. Organised in small cells, JI’s local units would seem to be relatively autonomous with regards to the choice of their targets and means.

The Timing

Almost exactly three years after 11 September 2001, about two years after the Bali attack, and one year after the explosion outside the Marriott Hotel, the timing of the embassy assault was highly symbolic. Also of tactical importance was that it came eleven days before Indonesia's presidential election and one month prior to Australia's parliamentary elections. In Australia, public support of the Iraq deployment had already begun to wane prior to September 9. In Indonesia, incumbent president Megawati Sukarnoputri had frequently been accused of a less than committed struggle against terrorism. Her designated successor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is a former general and coordinating minister for security—credentials that may have influenced the outcome of the election to some extent.

Not only Australia but several ASEAN members have criticised Jakarta's lacking readiness to exchange relevant information. It was therefore an irony of history that general staff officers from ASEAN countries had inconclusively discussed an Indonesian proposal to create a joint antiterrorist taskforce only two days prior to September 9.

Thus far, Indonesia's reservations have been mostly domestically motivated: with a population less than supportive of an anti-Islamist struggle, no presidential candidate readily embraced the issue. At the same time, the country's courts have not always shown a high degree of determination in persecuting suspected terrorists. Whereas as many as thirty-three JI members were convicted in the wake of the Bali bombing, some of the sentences were extremely mild, as Indonesia's August 2004 antiterror laws had been pronounced unconstitutional by a court and could not be applied to the case. Therefore the suspected participation in the Bali case of some jailed JI members could not be further investigated, and Ba'asyir's group will have to be charged for other crimes. Furthermore, disputes between the police and the military about

competence as well as a general lack of cooperation among the Indonesian security forces have been hampering investigation efforts. These domestic problems have also impeded the transregional cooperation sought by ASEAN members since the Bali bombing.

The situation has been further complicated by the Indonesian military's attempt to portray itself as the key actor in the anti-terrorist struggle. On the one hand, a comeback by the armed forces in domestic politics would endanger the country's fragile democratisation process. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether military action against terrorism can bring about sustainable success. Rather than eradicating Islamist terror, such a strategy, much as in Thailand and the Philippines, risks driving ever more young Muslims into the terrorists' fold.

Southeast Asia at the Crossroads

Within ASEAN, antiterrorist cooperation thus far has been limited to declarations and training activities sponsored by third parties. Almost every member of the association has territorial disputes with its neighbours and has been cultivating latent historical grievances. A deepening of the regional integration process has been prevented by a general insistence on mutual non-interference. For want of autonomous alternatives, most member states have decided to strengthen the anti-terrorist cooperation with a US that, under the Bush administration, has intensified its efforts to rebuild the American influence in Southeast Asia. If both Malaysia and Indonesia have opposed US proposals for joint antiterrorist patrols in the strategically important Straits of Malacca, and if Indonesia has recently made proposals of its own to improve the regional cooperation, these are little more than symbolical acts, given the national and transnational deficits mentioned above.

Whereas the creation of a joint antiterrorist taskforce would appear to be highly

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illusionary (some observers have interpreted this Indonesian initiative as a further step by the military to launch a political comeback), an improved intra-regional exchange of information would be urgently required. Should respective initiatives fail, ASEAN countries would be faced with a choice of either cooperating more closely on security with the US, Japan, and India or accepting new regional formats through which the People's Republic of China seeks to assume a leading role. The Chinese proposals have been increasingly self-conscious, and the PRC's regional policies have been less marked by a consideration for the sensitivities of smaller Southeast Asian partners. It was thus that Singapore, following a visit to Taiwan by Prime Minister-designate Lee Hsien Loong in September 2004, was threatened by Peking with a downgrading of relations. In the end, Singapore had to profess its neutrality in the case of an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN, through a network of dialogue processes extending to Washington, Peking, Tokyo, and Delhi, has been trying to turn itself into the "pivot" among great regional players and to thus keep Southeast Asia free from the very great power competition that had divided the region at the time of the Indo-Chinese wars. Should members refuse to recognise terrorism as their greatest security challenge and fail to draw necessary conclusions for integration, this dream would have to be abandoned for good.