

COUNTERING TERROR THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE ACTION

Cdr Nur Azmel Awaludin RMN

2016 started literally with a “bang” in Southeast Asia. The Jakarta bombing in January on Sarinah’s shopping mall and Starbucks café did only minor damage but dented Indonesia’s pride on counter terrorist measures. The siege ended following a 3-hour standoff between Indonesian security forces and the attackers. *Islamic State* (IS) was quick to claim victory over the attack and vowed more to come. Could this be a precursor to another Bali, Paris, or Bangkok attack closer to home? What lessons do we draw from this?

Militancy Rising?

The Southeast Asia region is home to a diverse community with a variety of cultures and religions. Islamic communities are predominantly in Indonesia, Malaysia, the south Philippines and south Thailand. Whilst militant ideologies vary in these countries, there is never a unifying factor among the militants. Jemaah Islamiyah tried to form a pan-Islamic state in South East Asia but the idea never took off as the militants neither speak the same language nor share the same vision. While militants in southern Thailand and the Philippines have taken the political path to achieve their aims, militants in Malaysia and Indonesia are drawn by the romanticisation of militancy. Militants from these two countries are part of IS operations in the Middle East.

The infamous Abu Bakar Bashir, founder of the Indonesian JI, not only gathered support and influence in Indonesia but also enhanced the ideology to radical Malaysian believers during his exile in 1982. On his return to Indonesia in 1989, the JI group already had supporters in Malaysia contributing their knowledge and expertise to the organisation’s efforts.

In the Philippines, growing numbers of criminal gangs have pledged allegiance to IS hoping to draw some funds from the organisation that is terrorising the Middle East. In so far as active participation in the Middle East is involved, their numbers are still small compared to Malaysia and Indonesia.

Who are affected?

Though the root of militancy is the idle mind, scholars and experts are stressing on the fact that terrorism can easily influence those with little knowledge and spiritual-religious backgrounds. Other major contributing factors are the lack of self-confidence, where feelings of dissatisfaction due to substandard economic status at the personal and right up to the state level, seriously affects the wellbeing and livelihood of these future so-called terrorist jihadists. The internal problem is being noticed and being used as a recruiting as well as training ground, where sympathiser not only fund but support in terms of other necessities such as infrastructures, transportation, and safe heaven retreats for the leaders.

Taking advantage of the economic status and problems faced by the local populace in the Southeast Asia region, terrorist have been manipulating the minds of

the frustrated. Opportunities in spreading terror are like feeding fuel into an already burning flame. The opportunity taken by these terrorist groups is by promoting alternative options in addressing personnel dilemmas, either in the monetary sense or simply religious repenting.

Besides groups fighting for autonomous rule, the Southeast Asia region is heavily involved in development projects and activities. However, the development distribution at a glance is believed to be insufficient in ensuring the distribution of wealth among its population. The problem with corruption and low governance has created gaps between the rich and poor, hence creating unhappiness and anger towards the rich and the governments.

However, the number of these so-called terrorist is still relatively small to create terror but the danger that these small groups of people can do is cause for concern. The damage caused may be small but the effect on the economy, livelihoods, and security is seriously affected. The worrying state would be if there is no action taken and the numbers of terrorists increase to a level where mitigation efforts may not be able to resolve the problem.

Deterrence?

How do we address this growing threat? Why wait for things to happen! It is clear that the problem is a state responsibility and steps to address should be now rather than wait for something bad to happen.

Malaysia is collaborating in the international fight against terror. Collaboration and cooperation among countries through networks such as INTERPOL and ASEANAPOL and bilateral as well as multilateral military exercises has enabled swift information sharing and action against suspected or known terrorists. These are physical in nature and do not address the root cause of terrorism. Ideology is something that cannot be destroyed or beaten. The killing of Osama bin Laden and IS leaders only scratches the surface, but has motivated the continuity of the struggle.

Suppressing the terror ideology should be made a priority in safeguarding the public, not only from any radical teaching but also from radical action. Malaysia's recent bold move to close the doors to those who took part in the war in the Middle East, placing police and security forces personnel in shopping malls and on road sides and areas of interests, and declaring them safe from terror attack in contrast to the Australian intelligence report, are only efforts at 'show' but do not address the terrorism problem as a whole. How effective has this initiative been? How much is enough and how enough is enough?

The infiltration of current influences through the social media cannot be stopped and in recent years has proven its effectiveness. Malaysia should enhance its cyber capability to deny terrorist organization from ever having the advantage to use any of the current technology. Malaysia should also be aggressive in areas of psychologically hindering Malaysians from joining and associating themselves with terrorist or radical organizations in the efforts to suppress the terrorism ideology. Deterrence is better than cure! Besides, at the government level, Malaysia should consider a comprehensive awareness program and road show on terrorism threats for all

Malaysians, regardless of their backgrounds, race, and religion at all levels of the education system, rural areas and village talks, factories and construction site workers, and media platforms.

As a maritime nation Malaysia is vulnerable to maritime-related terrorist activities. Can the same concept be feasible by placing security personnel along the 4,800 km stretch of Malaysia's coast line? A geo-fencing security maritime parameter surveillance system may be an alternative solution for Malaysia in protecting its maritime interests as well as the control of movements. Early detection and apprehension of threats may reduce unwanted incursion into the country.

Considering the needs in fighting terror, Malaysia's initiatives under the National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS), the establishment of a special force unit has been mooted and the yet to be made known National Special Operation Force (NSOF). At a glance, NSOF seem just like another special force that the military and security agencies have! Maybe it is, with a new approach to counter terrorism. However, is it enough just to have a specialized and dedicated team, or to really rationalise the NBOS concept, incorporating all aspects of psychological warfare integrated with hard kill approach to address and eliminate the problem before any damage can be done.

Conclusion

The 21st century poses challenges in the fight against terror. Deterrence efforts should be made a priority and would have higher success ratio compared to mitigation efforts. Malaysia has to create innovative and new ways and means to address the threat of terrorism influence at the state as well as regional level. It is never too late to re-evaluate the situation and implement new initiative towards ensuring a safer Malaysia.