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The Fight against Terrorism: What Role for ASEAN?

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ON ITS 40th anniversary, ASEAN's security model and role in the fight against terrorism need to be assessed. This commentary argues that ASEAN's cooperative model has not changed fundamentally. It also explores how this traditional approach to security has been applied to terrorism. The author is not optimistic about ASEAN's role as a promoter of a collective strategy against terrorism, although ASEAN has acted in Southeast Asia and beyond as a regional voice on the issue of terrorism.

AS ASEAN celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, it is timely to reflect on the Association's approach to security cooperation by examining its response to a contemporary threat -- terrorism. ASEAN's cooperative model has not changed fundamentally. The Association has continued to apply its traditional approach to security, based on comprehensive security and the principle of resilience. ASEAN is still utilised by individual members as a platform to define their positions towards external actors, whereas internally, the Association allows its members the freedom to pursue their domestic security strategies.

The response to terrorism in Southeast Asia has mostly occurred at the national and sub-regional levels through bilateral and trilateral cooperation. This does not mean that ASEAN has been insignificant. Consultations at the ASEAN level have had some political significance. The Association has issued joint declarations, produced some frameworks for cooperation, as well as reached agreements with external powers. Yet, while acknowledging its political role, ASEAN should not at this stage be regarded as a promoter of a collective strategy against terrorism.

ASEAN's Security Model

ASEAN's security model has been defined by an inward-looking approach to security and regional stability. Rather than concentrating on external military threats, the ASEAN members have favoured a comprehensive security agenda. This ASEAN approach has over the years been translated into policy prescription. A bottom-up approach progressing from the national to the regional level has been implemented. Individual member states have been responsible for their own security and preservation of national sovereignty. Members have enhanced their security through socio-economic development. This has led to reduced intra-regional tensions and regional vulnerabilities. Similarly, ASEAN has enhanced regional stability through its informal process of interaction, enabling member countries to concentrate on their domestic development.

ASEAN's Response to Terrorism

ASEAN's bottom-up approach to security has been applied to the threat of terrorism. The latter

remains primarily a domestic source of instability for Southeast Asian states. National and bilateral efforts have therefore mattered most when seeking to tackle these concerns. Southeast Asian countries have also adopted different security strategies and attained diverse levels of resilience against this challenge. In light of these circumstances, what role, if any, can ASEAN play? The Association has primarily acted in Southeast Asia and beyond as a regional voice on the issue of terrorism. What more can be done?

Joint Declarations

The ASEAN states have in recent years formulated a common rhetorical position and indicated their willingness to work together to combat terrorism. The Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism of November 2001 and the Declaration on Terrorism signed in early November 2002 were issued in response to 9/11 and the Bali Bombings respectively. Other joint statements have been signed by the ASEAN leaders in connection with subsequent terror attacks in Bali and Jakarta. With only limited relevance in terms of counter-terrorism, such declarations still have some symbolic and political value. They send a collective signal to the region and the wider international community.

External Relations

ASEAN has succeeded in defining a common position on terrorism toward external powers. In August 2002, the ASEAN members and the United States signed a Joint Declaration for Cooperation to Combat Terrorism. The agreement was a political statement that confirmed ASEAN's commitment to the fight against terrorism. Besides the United States, the Association has sought collaboration with China on a wide spectrum of trans-national challenges. It issued a joint declaration with China on non-traditional security issues in November 2002. Finally, the Southeast Asian countries have built ties with the European Union (EU). A Joint Declaration on Cooperation to Combat Terrorism was signed at the ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting in Brussels in January 2003.

Operational Cooperation

The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Trans-national Crime (AMMTC) has brought together the respective home ministers and has constituted the core of ASEAN's counter-terrorism collaboration. Special areas for discussion have included intelligence sharing, law enforcement, airport security, bomb detection, and others. The ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANOPOL) meetings have also aimed at promoting operational cooperation. Recent cooperative efforts have been rather disappointing, however, failing to contribute significantly to counter-terrorism. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that many of the operational responses have occurred at a sub-ASEAN level through bilateral and trilateral agreements.

In light of this operational challenge, the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) is an attempt by the member countries to respond more effectively to a series of trans-national threats facing Southeast Asia today, including terrorism. The ASC refers, for instance, to the formulation of an ASEAN Convention on counter-terrorism. It is too soon yet to assess the institutional strength of the ASC or its possible impact on terrorism. The operationalisation of the ASC is still being negotiated by member states, and the community is not expected to be established before 2020.

Next phase – more operational muscles needed

ASEAN has over the years developed a model of security cooperation. It has operated as an umbrella organisation, enabling its members to pursue individual rather than collective security strategies. The Association has acted as a common voice on terrorism both regionally and toward key external partners. It has also offered Southeast Asia some institutional capacity to cooperate multilaterally. The cooperative process has been uneven, however, as it has lacked deeper mechanisms for operational

cooperation. The Association is not yet equipped to offer a sustained response to a series of issues ranging from terrorism to environmental degradation and pandemics. Strengthening its operational capacities through the realisation of a security community will be ASEAN's primary challenge in the years to come.

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