

U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations: The War on Terrorism: Collaboration and Hesitation

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In a wide-ranging visit throughout Southeast Asia this March, FBI Director Robert Mueller carried the message that the United States believed al-Qaeda operatives were located in several ASEAN states and that the U.S. government was prepared to assist regional governments in locating and apprehending terrorists. Mueller's visit was stimulated by the discovery of a plot to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Singapore, which was thwarted by the arrests of dozens of people in Singapore and Malaysia. The plot apparently involved terrorist cells in these neighboring states as well as in Indonesia – all with suspected ties to al-Qaeda. Among the evidence gathered from the arrests in Singapore were surveillance videotapes of the U.S. Embassy and tons of explosives. In the Philippines, the United States has begun advising and training Philippine forces in the use of modern counterterrorist technology to enhance prospects for capturing the Abu Sayyaf terrorist gang holding two Americans and a Filipina hostage.

ASEAN states have reacted differently to the U.S. war on terrorism. The Philippines has welcomed U.S. troops for training exercises and solicited military and economic aid. Singapore conducted extensive arrests of terrorist cell members. Malaysia is cooperating with Singapore but rejects any suggestion of U.S. military involvement. Indonesia, home to multiple internal insurgencies, has hesitated to confront terrorist groups. President Megawati Sukarnoputri's government may view them as a distraction from its primary goal of holding the country together.

Islamic Radicalism in Southeast Asia

Within Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, radical Islamic groups exist. Their strength varies from country to country; their ability to extend operations beyond Southeast Asia, much less into the United States, is minimal. That said, a number of these groups, such as the Indonesian Islamic Defenders Front (IDF), have threatened U.S. installations and Westerners in Indonesia. The IDF and the militant *Laskar Jihad*, which has fought Christian Indonesians in the Moluccas, may have received some financial support from Usama bin Laden, though both groups deny links to al-Qaeda. Indeed, while these groups "talk the talk" of *jihad*, their activities are more akin to local terrorizing. The IDF ran protection rackets in Jakarta, while *Laskar Jihad* has directed its militance entirely against the Christians of eastern Indonesia.

Similarly, the 15 suspected terrorists arrested in Singapore in December 2001 were said to be part of a clandestine organization, *Jemaah Islamiah*. This group and a Malaysian counterpart, *Kumpulan Militan Malaysia* (KMM), had individual members who were trained in Afghanistan, but as yet no institutional linkages to al-Qaeda have been

established. In the Philippines (described in more detail below) the Abu Sayyaf may have had some contacts with al-Qaeda in the mid-1990s, but the group is viewed by most knowledgeable observers to be little more than bandits and thugs who murder and kidnap for ransom.

In much of Southeast Asia, most Islamic activism is associated with local issues, particularly separatism: the Achenese in Indonesia and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines. When the Philippine, Indonesian, and Malaysian governments express support – however limited – for U.S. antiterrorist initiatives, there is frequently a *quid pro quo*. That is, the U.S. must include each country's particular national terrorist challenge under the U.S. rubric of global terrorism. Thus, for example, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad can paint the Islamic opposition party PAS (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party or Islam Se-Malaysia) with a terrorist brush for his own political reasons in exchange for not having to worry about U.S. human-rights sensibilities.

Nonetheless, al-Qaeda members have moved in and out of Indonesia regularly over the past decade and have funneled millions of dollars to radical Islamic groups there. Moreover, militants in Indonesia are found in both the police and military. To make matters worse, unlike Singapore and Malaysia, where the authorities are searching out and disrupting terrorist cells, Indonesia has chosen to deport rather than incarcerate suspects and has also declined to look for bank accounts linked to terror groups.

In late January, Indonesia's intelligence agency confirmed the existence of an al-Qaeda training camp in Sulawesi, which included not only Indonesians but also Europeans and Thais. Nevertheless, the government has been loath to make arrests. It has not seriously searched for the cleric Riudan Manuddin, even though the United States named him the probable operational director of the plot to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Singapore. Neither has Abu Bakar Bashir been detained despite being identified by U.S. intelligence as a paymaster for Muslim militant organizations. President Megawati's reticence toward antiterrorism is based both on worry of an Islamic backlash and the fact that Islamic political parties are allied with Vice President Hamzah Haz, who has designs on the presidency.

While the Pentagon would like to allocate the lion's share of \$21 million recently appropriated for global antiterrorism to Indonesia, its ability to do so is obstructed by Congressional restrictions on aid to the Indonesian armed forces because of the latter's poor human-rights record.

The most surprising terrorist development in Southeast Asia was the discovery of an elaborate Islamic group in Singapore that was plotting to bomb Western embassies and U.S. military personnel on the island. Of the 15 arrested, all but one was Singaporean. Given the city-state's tight internal security, it is remarkable that such a large group had gone undetected for so long, though local officials claimed they had been monitoring the group for some time. Interrogation revealed that the members of the cell had contacted al-Qaeda about funding their plan, but bin Laden's organization did not follow up. In addition to evidence of the cell's plans in Singapore, information about its plans was

found in Afghanistan at the homes and offices of al-Qaeda operatives who had fled. Officials in Malaysia and Singapore agreed that the cells in their countries had been part of a network that included Indonesia and the Philippines. Yet when Malaysia and Singapore asked Indonesia to detain Bashir, allegedly linked to the attacks, Jakarta demurred saying it had no evidence Bashir had committed any crime. Bashir, founder of a radical boy's boarding school in Java where many of the 28 arrested Singaporeans and Malaysians had studied, stands apart from the mainstream of moderate Islam in Indonesia. Bashir's school became a funnel for radical Islam in Java, including *Laskar Jihad*.

These Southeast Asian " sleeper " groups had been organized in the early 1990s and were activated after the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, possibly on orders from al-Qaeda leaders. Several of the Malaysian militants had been trained by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, repatriated, and told to avoid contact with Islamic organizations to prevent official suspicions. As one Western diplomat put it in referring to the Southeast Asian network: " These guys were not a rogue group. There was a management hierarchy and a functional breakdown. It was like a KGB cell. " Singaporean authorities believe these cells are instruments of al-Qaeda. Others are not so sure, though they acknowledge al-Qaeda contacts with some members of the cells. Malaysia seemed to be the center for Southeast Asian militants because Kuala Lumpur does not require visas for citizens from Muslim countries.

Subsequent investigations and arrests in Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines have reinforced the conclusion that at least two of the Sept. 11 hijackers had met in Malaysia and received cash from a Malaysian cell member. The United States has been negotiating with Malaysia for the extradition of the Malaysian Army captain who allegedly served as paymaster for the Sept. 11 hijackers, but Prime Minister Mahathir publicly rejects the suggestion that his country could have been used as a staging area. While Malaysian authorities have shared the results of their interrogations of arrested militants with the United States, they resist extraditing them.

In March the Bush administration decided it would be " counterproductive " to send U.S. troops to Indonesia out of concern for an anti-American reaction. Rather, a decision was made to work through law enforcement agencies. Hence, the visit to Jakarta in mid-March by FBI Director Robert Mueller. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a former ambassador to Indonesia, pointed to the deep sense of pride and independence in Indonesia and stated: " If we want their cooperation, and their cooperation is essential to our success, we can't look like we are interfering in their internal affairs. "

U.S. Operations in the Philippines

In late January, the United States began to deploy what is scheduled to become 660 U.S. soldiers, including Special Forces, to the southern Philippines where Muslim resentment against the Christian central government is as old as the Philippines itself. Upon the invitation of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the U.S. contingent is participating in " Balikatan 2002, " a joint training exercise whose predecessors always took place in

Luzon or the Visayas out of harm's way. This time, however, the exercise will be carried out at least partly on the island of Basilan where a small militant group, the Abu Sayyaf, is holding two Americans and a Filipina hostage. From a professional military perspective, "Balikatan 2002" offers U.S. antiterrorist training, particularly in the use of up-to-date equipment, including night-vision capability and state-of-the-art communications. Small numbers of Americans are to be assigned to Philippine forces as advisors but not as combatants.

President Macapagal-Arroyo's invitation has led to considerable controversy within the Philippine Congress and vocal opposition from the country's political left, though it has elicited support from the country's Catholic Bishops Conference, which in the early 1990s was strongly opposed to a U.S. military presence. The Philippine president has calculated that the political fallout is more than compensated by U.S. military and economic aid, which will improve the capacity of the armed forces to combat insurgencies and will pump resources into the economy.

From the U.S. perspective, the deployment of U.S. forces to the Philippines, albeit under the guise of a training exercise, constitutes the next location for the U.S. war on terrorism after Afghanistan. Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz stated that the destruction of the Abu Sayyaf "would be a small blow against the al-Qaeda network," though he went on to emphasize that military actions would be carried out by Philippine troops. The exercise is scheduled to last until June with the possibility of an extension until the end of the year. Its U.S. commander is Brig. Gen. Donald Wurster, the head of Special Operations in the Pacific, an indication of how important Washington sees this deployment.

In fact, the Abu Sayyaf's current connection to al-Qaeda is problematic. While the Abu Sayyaf was formed in the early 1990s and in its early days proclaimed religious fervor, it has become a criminal gang engaged in murder and kidnapping for ransom, striking not only in the Philippines but also in Malaysia. The group's focus is the southern Philippines; it possesses neither the intention nor the capability to strike the United States. Although it may have had some early contacts with al-Qaeda operatives in the mid-1990s, there is no evidence that these have continued, especially since the Abu Sayyaf now funds itself through kidnappings, which have raised in excess of \$20 million. Rather than an al-Qaeda clone, the Abu Sayyaf is more in the tradition of southern Philippine pirates.

The main issues in the joint exercise, which in many respects is a search and rescue operation, are who commands the U.S. participants and what their rules of engagement are. The understanding appears to be that the U.S. troops serve only as advisors, do not engage in combat, but can defend themselves if attacked. How all this plays out in the fog of battle, however, remains to be seen. As for who commands, U.S. law and practice require that U.S. officers command U.S. forces. However, the Philippine constitution prohibits the operation of foreign combat forces on Philippine soil – a major reason for the U.S. deployment being called a training exercise. Discussions between the two countries' defense and foreign policy leaders apparently led to an understanding that Philippine officers had "authority" over the forces they lead including U.S. advisors; but

U.S. officers retained “command.” (One wonders if this is a distinction without a difference.) Nevertheless, through March, no U.S. advisors were involved in firefights against the Abu Sayyaf.

There are other risks for the U.S. forces in Zamboanga and Basilan. One is that the Abu Sayyaf could be confused with the MILF, a much larger dissident organization with armed forces that is engaged in negotiations with Manila. Moreover, some former rebels who had fought with the MILF and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the latter now governing part of Mindanao, have defected to the rebel side. If Philippine forces with U.S. advisors clash with these groups, the whole basis of the U.S. presence is undermined. Another possibility is that the Abu Sayyaf may try to seize a propaganda advantage from the U.S. presence by recasting the conflict as a fight by foreign Christians against righteous Muslim warriors. An additional disturbing feature is the Philippine Army’s reputation in Muslim-controlled areas. It has employed some of the same terrorist tactics as its adversary. Since the Abu Sayyaf has no uniforms and can melt into the civilian population, the parallel with the Vietnam War should be disturbing to U.S. armed forces.

In February, the United States began intelligence-gathering flights over the southern Philippines. Based elsewhere in Asia, the planes are capable of detecting human movement in the jungle as well as monitoring cell phones. Unmanned aerial vehicles are also being used. Additionally, U.S. advisors are training their Philippine counterparts to fly night-capable Huey helicopters. While Philippine forces have been engaging the kidnap/ransom group more vigorously since the Americans arrived, the hostages have still not been located as of March 2002.

A Cautious Conclusion

Southeast Asian terrorist groups are essentially homegrown and not part of a centrally organized international terrorist network, although individual members have trained with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Some Islamists from Malaysia have gone to participate with *Laskar Jihad* in Indonesia, but for the most part, these groups are small, poorly armed, and stay at home. Embryonic efforts at intelligence sharing within the region have begun, but they must overcome local nationalism and some suspicions of sharing secrets with neighbors.

The United States is offering financial and technical assistance to enhance antiterrorist capabilities for the police, customs, and finance officials as well as regional armed forces. This year’s annual “Cobra Gold” joint exercise in Thailand will focus on an antiterrorist scenario involving participants from Singapore, Thailand, and the United States as well as observers from several other Asian states, including China.

Yet over the long run, Southeast Asian states must change the political-social-economic milieu in which terrorism breeds. Specifically, socio-economic development in the southern Philippines, economic recovery in Indonesia, as well as the restoration of law and order in the Moluccas and Sulawesi, and still in Indonesia, a political solution to the

conflicts in Aceh and Papua (Irian Jaya). Internal security resources in Southeast Asia are low. Until these capabilities are enhanced and the socio-economic deficits erased, terrorism will continue to flourish regardless of outside efforts to eradicate it. Hunting down terrorists deals with the symptoms but not the underlying disease.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations January–March 2002

Jan. 1, 2002: Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Diomedio Villaneuva states he does not favor U.S. forces participating in military operations in Basilan.

Jan. 1, 2002: A Philippine Army spokesman says that the Philippine military is primarily interested in acquiring new U.S. equipment to use against the Abu Sayyaf terrorists.

Jan. 1, 2002: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad states his country wishes to improve relations with the U.S. and that Malaysia is a “stable, democratic, progressive Muslim nation.”

Jan. 3, 2002: Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo states that U.S. troops will not be used to fight against the Abu Sayyaf.

Jan. 4, 2002: Malaysia arrests 13 terrorists, but Defense Minister Najib denies that al-Qaeda cells exist in his country.

Jan. 6, 2002: Singapore announces the December arrest of 15 Muslim extremists, accusing them of planning to blow up military targets and embassies in the city-state and focusing on the U.S.; the 15 are said to be linked to al-Qaeda.

Jan. 7, 2002: Philippine presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao says that there can be no base for U.S. forces in the Philippines and that U.S. advisors will be under the command of Philippine officers.

Jan. 7, 2002: Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz says that U.S. armed forces are assisting friendly states such as the Philippines and Indonesia to close down terrorist networks.

Jan. 8, 2002: USCINCPAC Adm. Dennis Blair states that multilateral cooperation is essential in the war on terrorism and will be a common cause for Asia.

Jan. 9, 2002: Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayudha states that Indonesia had been cracking down on terrorism long before Sept. 11 and had cross-border controls in place.

Jan. 11, 2002: U.S. and Indonesian intelligence officials believe that hundreds of foreigners who may be linked to al-Qaeda visited a secret training camp in Indonesia.

Jan. 11, 2002: Philippine Foreign Affairs Under Secretary Lauro Paja believes that U.S. forces will be sucked into the fighting against the Abu Sayyaf.

Jan. 11, 2002: The U.S. Embassy in Singapore releases a statement of confidence in the ability of the Singapore government to protect U.S. citizens and interests in the wake of the revelation that the 15 Muslims arrested were targeting U.S. military facilities and personnel.

Jan. 15, 2002: Philippine presidential spokesman states that the U.S. could participate in the rescue of the American hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf and that they have the right to defend themselves if fired upon.

Jan. 18, 2002: Singapore's National Security Department releases a statement claiming that it had independently identified the *Jemaah Islamiah* terrorists in Singapore and did not rely on video tape in Afghanistan found by U.S. forces to locate the suspects.

Jan. 18, 2002: Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo notes that she has asked the U.S. not to include the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao on its list of terrorists because the government is negotiating with it.

Jan. 18, 2002: U.S. Senator Sam Brownback says that the Philippines would be the next Afghanistan while the Philippine president reiterates that foreign troops will not be involved in combat. The U.S. chargé in Manila also refutes Brownback's statement.

Jan. 18, 2002: It is revealed that the Pentagon is resuming limited training of Indonesian forces in counterterrorism.

Jan. 23, 2002: Secretary of State Colin Powell justifies the U.S.-Philippine "Balikatan 2002" exercise as help from the United States to aid the Philippine effort to defeat terrorism.

Jan. 23, 2002: Philippine Vice President Teofisto Guingani, Jr. abandons his opposition to U.S. forces advising Philippine troops in Mindanao. Another opponent, Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, also lifts his opposition.

Jan. 25, 2002: Malaysia files an official protest to the U.S. Embassy assailing U.S. the "inhumane" treatment of Taliban and al-Qaeda detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Jan. 25, 2002: The U.S. announces it is providing the Philippine military eight helicopters, a high-speed patrol boat, and 30,000 M-16 rifles for use against the Abu Sayyaf.

Jan. 29, 2002: The Philippine Catholic Bishops Conference expresses full support for U.S. assistance to crush the Abu Sayyaf.

Jan. 29, 2002: Indonesian FM Hasan Wirayuda announces that the U.S. has offered training for Indonesian police to combat international terrorism.

Jan. 30, 2002: An FBI report states that al-Qaeda operatives met in Malaysia during 2000 to plan the Sept. 11 attacks and that Malaysia has emerged as “one of the primary operational launch pads” for the attacks.

Jan. 30, 2002: Adm. Blair states that the U.S. goal in Asia is to ensure that the region becomes inhospitable for terrorists.

Jan. 30, 2002: U.S. Special Forces C-130 aircraft is fired upon while flying over Luzon in an area where the Communist New People’s Army has forces.

Jan. 31, 2002: High-level Philippine officials express dismay at President Bush’s remarks that the Philippines was harboring international terrorists.

Feb. 4, 2002: One thousand protestors demonstrate in front of the U.S. Embassy in Manila against the “Balikatan 2002” exercise in Mindanao.

Feb. 6, 2002: CIA Director George Tenet in Congressional testimony says that al-Qaeda may be connected to terrorist groups in Indonesia and the Philippines.

Feb. 8, 2002: Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo lashes out at opponents of the joint Philippines-U.S. “Balikatan 2002” exercise in Basilan as “anti-Filipino and partners of terrorists.”

Feb. 10, 2002: The U.S. expresses disappointment that the UN has decided to pull out from trial arrangements in Cambodia for surviving Khmer Rouge leaders. The Cambodian government refused to accept UN conditions for the tribunal that had largely been crafted by the U.S.

Feb. 11, 2002: The U.S. and Thailand announce a joint program to combat the smuggling of people for prostitution and illegal labor. The U.S. will provide training equipment and money.

Feb. 13, 2002: The U.S. and Philippines sign a Terms of Reference for their joint military exercise, which stipulates that U.S. forces would not become involved in conflicts with groups currently negotiating with the Philippine government [i.e., the MILF].

Feb. 14, 2002: Malaysian government says that Yazual Sufaat, a former Malaysian Army captain allegedly involved in the Sept. 11 bombings, will not be extradited to the U.S. but dealt with under Malaysian law.

Feb. 21, 2002: A U.S. Army Special Forces helicopter crashes into the sea in the Philippines while on a routine flight during “Balikatan 2002,” killing all passengers.

Feb. 21, 2002: Adm. Blair emphasizes the importance of Asian regional cooperation in the war on terrorism at a Pacific defense symposium in Washington, D.C.

Feb. 21, 2002: The U.S. begins intelligence-gathering flights over the southern Philippines in the hunt for the Abu Sayyaf as part of the “Balikatan 2002” joint exercise.

Feb. 26, 2002: Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra reacts strongly to U.S. State Department criticism of Thailand’s decision to expel a *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent for an article discussing tension between the prime minister and the king.

Feb. 28, 2002: U.S. Navy Secretary Gordon England praises Singapore for contributing to the security and stability of Southeast Asia.

March 1, 2002: Adm. Blair before a House subcommittee warns that U.S. involvement in the Philippines could become a Vietnam War-like “slippery slope” if the conflict broadens beyond its original mission.

March 1, 2002: Adm. Blair tells U.S. Congressman Dana Rohrabacker that Taiwan’s offer of five F-5s to the Philippines would benefit its air force.

March 6, 2002: Vietnam and the U.S. agree to conduct joint research on the effects of Agent Orange – the defoliant used by the U.S. during the Vietnam War which may have had long-term adverse health effects.

March 10, 2002: The U.S. sends a special prosecutor to Southeast Asia to facilitate the extradition of terrorists apprehended in the region.

March 14, 2002: U.S. pilots train Philippine counterparts in the use of Huey helicopters with night-flying capability. Initially earmarked for Basilan, there may be another target – Jolo, bastion of the MILF.

March 20, 2002: FBI Director Robert Mueller in the Philippines states that he believes al-Qaeda operatives are active in several Southeast Asian countries.

March 20, 2002: U.S. Army Special Forces speed into a Basilan combat zone to rescue wounded Philippine soldiers after a clash with the Abu Sayyaf.

March 27, 2002: Senators Daniel Inouye and Ted Stevens are given permission by the Philippines to observe “Balikatan 2002” as a prelude for more U.S. antiterrorist and legislation for the Philippines.