# BEYOND THE "WAR ON TERROR": SOUTHEAST ASIA'S FUTURE POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

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In the 10 minutes allotted to me I would like to look beyond the "war on terror" and focus on some key political and security challenges confronting Southeast Asia.

Let me begin though with some comments on the so-called war on terror, the term used to refer to the offensive against the threat posed by the Al Qaeda and groups linked to it. For the US and some of its allies the war was paramount. Global security and security in Southeast Asia was a key front – indeed the second front – of the ward, and regional states were supposed to subordinate other security concerns to this paramount security threat.

The reality in the region however was very different. The threat of "international terrorism" was taken very seriously, but it was a limited threat. It essentially took the form of the Jemaah Islamiyah. Singapore and Malaysia cracked down on it swiftly, and when Indonesia snapped out of its initial denial after Bali, the threat there too was quickly contained.

The threat is not over and there should be no complacency. There still could be attacks. But the fact is that the JI today is to all intents and purposes decimated. In this respect, the "war" in Southeast Asia has essentially been won. This is in sharp contrast to the abysmal failure of the "war" in the Middle East, and the spread of the threat to the heart of Europe. There has to be a fundamental shift in threat assessment: Europe is today the second front. Southeast Asia is by comparison a distant third. (AFP report in *The Star* 17 July 2007: Britain's security services: up to 30 militant cells, 2000 suspects and another 2000 sympathisers in UK).

The important achievement of the countries of Southeast Asia has not been sufficiently recognised and appreciated.  It should.

The "war on terror" also did not concern several countries in the region.  It hardly appeared on the radar in Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Brunei.  In countries like Malaysia which has zero tolerance for terrorism of any kind and which disabled JI elements there promptly, it was still never security threat No. 1.  The priority security concerns were elsewhere.

For Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines the biggest threats were from domestic insurgencies, not from "international terrorism".  These domestic insurgencies existed well before September 11.  The insurgencies involved Buddhists in Myanmar, Muslims who were opposing the Thai government in Thailand and not the United States or its allies, and Catholic and Muslim insurgents who were fighting Manila in the Philippines.  The MILF and the ASG in the Philippines had only marginal links with the Al Qaeda.

The "war on terror" thus only had limited salience in Southeast Asia and it has been largely defeated.  It is therefore indeed fitting that we look beyond the September 11 prism and focus on the region's future security and political challenges.

Here I would like to briefly highlight just three challenges that may be relevant to the theme of this conference.

1. <u>Nation-building: enhancing political development and strengthening domestic peace</u>

The greatest political and security challenges to Southeast Asian countries come from within, and in almost all instances they are associated with the process of nation-building following colonisation.

A half century or so is not much for nation-building.  The process usually takes considerably longer.  Virtually all the countries of the region are in the thick of this process.  This is especially evident in the field of establishing

sovereign authority, bonding the people and giving them a shared national identity. It is also evident in the fostering of sound political institutions that are acceptable to the people. Problems related to these critical issues often result in serious stresses to the body politic and violent conflicts in extreme cases.

The challenges are more formidable in some countries than in others for various reasons including history and demographic and cultural mix besides political factors. In Myanmar the National League for Democracy, the 88 Generation, the Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks and ethnic groups that have organized themselves into political parties or taken up arms, are al challenging the military-dominated State Peace and Development Council. The planned May constitutional referendum and 2010 elections show little prospect of yielding any durable solution. In the meantime 3 insurgent groups still defy the SPDC (the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Shan State Army-South).

In Thailand militant Malay Muslim groups have resumed a 100-year struggle for greater autonomy and empowerment after the Pattani kingdom was invaded and annexed by Thai Buddhist forces in 1902. (Almost 3000 deaths in the last four years). Thailand also faces the challenge of stabilising democratic processes in the country.

In the Philippines manila is combating the National Democratic Fron (CPP/NPA), the MNLF and the MILF, though peaceful negotiations are being held with the latter. The Abu Sayyaf Group is believed by some to be all but defunct despite the talking up of the threat.

In all these cases nation-building is unlikely to proceed smoothly until political accommodation rather than violent confrontation is the preferred option for governments.

The worst appears over for Indonesia, but problems continue in areas like Sulawesi and Papua.

The other countries in the region are relatively peaceful and stable as of now.  In Malaysia though, albeit less prominently now, race and faith continue to stress relations among the diverse ethnic and religious groups, and occasionally are cause for security concern.  More seriously, pressure for democratic reform in presently non-democratic states may in the future trigger violence and instability in these countries if poorly managed.

Southeast Asia's domestic security and political challenges are therefore as diverse as the component states.  The responses would obviously need to be equally varied.  But nation-building and domestic peace would benefit greatly if states practiced good governance, respected and gave a seat at the table to minorities rather than oppress or marginalize them, and dramatically improved the conditions of the poor and the disadvantaged.

## 2.    Building the ASEAN Security Community

Southeast Asia's future lies primarily in the hands of its individual countries and in the way they manage their bilateral relations, not in ASEAN.  ASEAN only plays a supportive role, and its writ is limited and narrow compared to the European Union.  Some of us in the non-government community especially demand of ASEAN what it is not empowered to do, and when ASEAN cannot deliver we become very upset and assail it.

ASEAN's role in regional security however is expanding especially with the ASEAN Charter, which I believe will be ratified by all members.  I highlight two primary issues that ASEAN countries must address with regards to the ASEAN political and security community:

i.    How to manage differences in expectations arising from political contradictions within ASEAN.  Traditionally, ASEAN has been blind to differences in political systems and observed the principle of non-interference scrupulously.  This stance is now

becoming more diluted.  The more democratic members led by their civil society groups are more assertive with regards to the promotion of human rights and humanitarian issues in other countries.  This is causing strains within ASEAN.  Indeed, we are facing a severe test now with regard to the ratification of the ASEAN Charter due to this issue.  I hope cool statesmanship rather than uncompromising opposition will prevail in the end.  I believe these differences will become minimal as all ASEAN countries become democratic.

ii.   How to forge a common ASEAN strategic stance amid the different strategic interests and threat perceptions of the members.  ASEAN members differ on the challenge they see from China we well as the role they see for the United States in the region.  Mild distrust and bilateral differences also exist between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

3.   **How to respond to and moderate major power rivalry in the Asia Pacific**

ASEAN has so far played little role either on its own or in the ARF to moderate rivalry among the major power that has been resuscitated following the resurgence of China and India.  The passivity, or even avoidance of responsibility on the part of both ASEAN and the ARF, could cost the region dear if major power rivalry sharpens in the years ahead.
ASEAN could play a more effective and constructive role in promoting regional peace and stability if:

i.   Members retrained from taking sides and participating in this emerging rivalry even if they have defence and strategic ties with one side.  (Singapore in fact has taken a firm side in the rivalry.  It participated in the Andaman exercise last year alongside the so-called "coalition of democracies" involving the US, Japan, Australia and India).

ii.      **ASEAN both by itself and through the ARF moderates the rivalry by urging all sides to refrain from making comments or taking initiatives that only serve to aggravate matters (e.g. unnecessary and provocative strengthening of military alliances, irresponsible formation of coalitions and the holding of military exercises).**

**If ASEAN is too timid or reluctant to play this role it has lost another strategic opportunity to demonstrate its relevance to advancing regional peace and stability.**

**END**

<u>**The "war on terror"**</u>

1. **We cannot be in denial. The brutal truth is that six years later and still counting, we have lost "the war on terror". From whichever angle we look at it, the "war" has been a monumental failure:**

   - **Enemy resilience;**
   - **Deaths and injuries to coalition troops, innocent men, women and children in Iraq and elsewhere;**
   - **The widespread destruction of a nation which was home to an ancient civilisation;**
   - **4 million Iraqi women, men and children displaced and forced to become refugees;**
   - **the negative outlook in Afghanistan;**
   - **the spread of the terrorist threat to the heart of Europe;**
   - **the mounting financial and economic costs of the "war";**
   - **the rise in the price of oil and its global repercussions especially on the poor;**
   - **the growing hostility between resurgent Iran and Arab nations;**
   - **or the deep divide that has developed between the Muslim world and the West;**

   **Not only has the war been a failure, Western policies in the Middle East, nourished also by local political and socio-economic conditions, are breeding fresh generations of militants and terrorists.**