

The Asian Security Environment After 911 terrorism – Southeast Asia

by Derek da Cunha

Southeast Asia has been described as the second front in the war against terrorism. The reason for this is that after the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and after Al Qaeda had been driven out from that country, the Muslim terrorist group was seen to want to reconstitute itself in some other region where it could attack Western and pro-Western interests on its own terms. Southeast Asia was viewed as just such a region. The reasons for this have been, variously, the existence of large Muslim communities there (some 240 million Muslims); Southeast Asia's easily penetrable geography; the existence of significant Western and pro-Western interests; and a generally lax security environment.

The discovery in late 2001 and throughout 2002 of cells of a local affiliate of Al Qaeda, the Jemaah Islamiah, in several Southeast Asian states – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore – and its alleged plans for a campaign of bombings tended to give credence that the new global arena for terrorism is Southeast Asia. This was dramatized by the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002 which killed more than 190 people, most of whom were Westerners.

Terrorism has therefore come to the top of the security agenda in states in Southeast Asia. And those states have had to grapple with it. However, terrorism, has not led to a structural change in the geopolitical realities of Southeast Asia. Although the issue of transnational terrorism after 911 has galvanized the ASEAN states to cooperate in anti-terror efforts, below this multilateral level longstanding security problems and tensions between states in Southeast Asia remain and continue to define their national and security policies to a degree that has been masked by the frenzied media interest in terrorism post-911. This is well reflected in an on-going and across-the-board military modernization and expansion by most Southeast Asia states, which includes many of them acquiring the kind of military hardware for conventional threats, rather than the unconventional threat of terrorism. Significantly, states have used the spectre of the terrorist threat to justify their continuing military buildup. In other words, the terrorist threat has been used as a pretext for ongoing military expansion plans by some states.

Although another effect of Southeast Asia seemingly becoming the second front in the campaign against terrorism has been the United States' military re-engagement with the region, this has not translated into overall US attention to the region's wider strategic concerns and interests. Washington is merely interested in pursuing its anti-terror campaign, and its supposed strategic re-engagement in Southeast Asia is very narrowly focused on that particular issue. To confuse the two is to make a mistake about US strategic intentions and objectives.

911 and transnational terrorism have indeed had a marked impact on Southeast Asia's security dynamics. However, broader geopolitical issues, such as China's future role in the region or whether Indonesia's current territorial configuration will remain, are likely to be more deterministic of the region's geopolitical environment over the long term.

Those issues will be enduring even after the issue of terrorism no longer makes the newspaper headlines.