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Asian Threat Forecast in 2011

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Synopsis

Terrorism and insurgency will remain the top threats in Asia in 2011. Asian governments must work closely with the West to stabilise Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, increasing fatalities of Western forces in Afghanistan will put greater Western public pressure on the US and its allies to withdraw.

Commentary

IN 2011, terrorism and insurgency will remain the tier-one non-traditional security threats in Asia. Located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Al Qaeda continues to influence threat groups in Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. While South Asia will appreciably suffer from terrorism in 2011, economic prosperity in Southeast and Northeast Asia will both pre-empt and counter the threat of ideological extremism and its by-product, terrorism. Nonetheless, with the exception of the terrorist and insurgent threats in South Asia, Asia is one of the world's more stable and secure regions.

The Threat Environment

The global threat landscape will continue to pose significant challenges in 2011. A range of national security threats - missile and fissile proliferation, organised crime, especially narcotics, maritime piracy, and, insurgency and terrorism - will confront the world. The weapons of mass destruction programmes of Iran and North Korea, two defiant states, will challenge the West to act. Nonetheless, existing and emerging insurgency and terrorist campaigns will both dominate the media headlines, with political violence posing a serious threat to most governments and societies.

Terrorism and insurgency driven by left wing, ethno-political and politico-religious groups and movements threaten Asia. Except for left wing insurgencies in India and the Philippines, support for Marxist, Leninist and Maoist insurgencies will continue to be on the decline. Nonetheless, the potential for violence in Nepal and Bangladesh by left wing insurgent groups remain significant. The most active ethno-political insurgency in Asia is in Thailand waged by nationalist groups. The multiple groups in southern Thailand are coming under the greater influence of other Southeast Asian Muslim groups, especially Jemaah Islamiyah. With the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), peace has returned to Sri Lanka. The most significant threat of political extremism and violence to the world including to Asia stems from groups that seek to misinterpret and misrepresent Islam.

The Context

Globally, the threat of insurgency and terrorism will stem from four regions. They are in order of threat: Afghanistan-Pakistan; the Levant-Arabian Peninsula; the Horn of Africa; and the Maghreb-Sahel. The Afghanistan-Pakistan region remains an unstable area. Nonetheless, with Pakistani military successes in tribal Pakistan, Al Qaeda's operational capability has dramatically shrunk. However, Al Qaeda-inspired and -instigated groups such as the Islamic Jihad Union and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, Pakistani Taliban, Turkistani Islamic Party in China, pose an enduring threat. Other than mounting attacks in Afghanistan, these groups attack their countries of origin. With Al Qaeda marking the 10th anniversary of its iconic attacks on United States targets on September 11 2011, the US, its allies and friends are likely to witness a spike in terrorist incidents.

Trends and Patterns

In Asia, the most serious threat is in South Asia. While Afghanistan and tribal Pakistan face insurgencies, mainland Pakistan suffers from terrorism. The Pakistani military has cleared Swat and South Waziristan but Al Qaeda and its associated groups, notably the Pakistani Taliban, operate out of North Waziristan. India suffers from multiple insurgencies both in the north and the northeast. Despite significant investment to secure Indian cities, Mumbai, New Delhi, and other urban centres face an enduring terrorist threat. The threat in South Asia is followed by Central Asia and Southeast Asia. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan face threats from groups based on the Pakistan and Afghanistan border. Effective border control coupled with intelligence operations has reduced the threat of terrorism in Central Asia.

In Southeast Asia, most insurgent and terrorist groups are based in Indonesia, southern Thailand and southern Philippines. Due to effective operations by Detachment 88, Indonesia's counter terrorism agency, the threat in Indonesia has dramatically declined. Nonetheless, the lack of a proper legal and judicial framework as well as the absence of a counter-extremist strategy perpetuates the threat. Compared to South Asia, the sub-regions of Central Asia, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia face a low terrorist threat. Nonetheless, these regions of rapid economic growth are affected by serious organised crime. Increasingly, Asian transnational terrorists and criminal networks operate both in the cyber and the real worlds. The support networks in cyberspace engaged in extremist propaganda and terrorist and insurgent fundraising are likely to grow.

The Response

To effectively fight terrorism and insurgency, the single most important weapon is intelligence. In addition to investing in technical platforms for collection and developing human sources, maintaining and managing counter-terrorism databases and building state-of-the-art analytic and strike capabilities are crucial. To fight protracted terrorist and insurgent campaigns, affected governments must build threat-based intelligence, law enforcement and military forces. With terrorist and insurgent groups developing transnational capabilities, international security and intelligence cooperation is paramount. As terrorism can affect any country, governments should build capability-based security forces that can respond to a wide spectrum of threats.

In Asia, as in the rest of the world, the counter-ideological fight to prevent terrorism remains the biggest challenge. As terrorism is only a by-product of ideological extremism, it is paramount for governments and their partners to counter the spread of ideological extremism in the general population. With Al Qaeda and its associated groups investing in propaganda to politicise and radicalise the Muslim population, it is essential for governments to build a norm against advocacy, support and participation in violence. Without community engagement programmes, there will be more support for political violence. For counter-terrorism and counter extremism to be effective, governments must build and work in partnership with religious and educational institutions as well as the mass media.

At a more strategic level, Asian governments must work closely with the West to stabilise Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such conflict zones generate virulent ideologies, cause internal displacement and refugee flows, and contribute to terrorism. Without diverting the resources to Afghanistan, it is essential to increase the capacity of the Pakistani government to respond to the many economic and security challenges it faces. With increasing fatalities and injuries of Western forces in Afghanistan as well as a growing threat of terrorism to the US and to Europe, there will be greater Western public pressure on the US and its allies to withdraw from Afghanistan. Statements from political leaders including President Obama on timelines for withdrawal are likely to embolden the insurgents in Afghanistan and aggravate the global terrorist threat, including to Asia.

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