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The Evolving Threat Landscape in Southeast Asia After the Disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah in Indonesia raises concerns about the potential formation of new splinter groups made up of former members, which could destabilise security across Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A multi-faceted and cooperative approach is essential to ensure that the disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah leads to lasting peace rather than a reprieve from extremism.

COMMENTARY

The disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia signals a significant development in Southeast Asia's counter-terrorism landscape. While this is a relief for security agencies, the potential repercussions could present new security challenges. The historical resilience of JI, coupled with its deeply-rooted networks and ideological appeal, raises the possibility of new and more radical splinter groups comprising disillusioned members emerging. This potential evolution of the JI threat underlines the urgent need for a coordinated and multifaceted approach to counter-terrorism that addresses Southeast Asia's immediate and long-term security.

Formation of New Splinter Groups

The disbandment of JI suggests a step backwards from organised violence. Its surrender of weapons, including firearms previously hidden in remote areas, indicates some level of commitment to disarmament. Despite these, one of the most pressing concerns is the potential for forming new, more radical splinter groups. Some former members may feel betrayed by the leadership's decision and could form new factions committed to continuing JI's ideological struggle. The sentiment that the senior leaders

have "destroyed their own house" could fuel such fragmentation, leading to the gradual emergence of cells with more extreme views and tactics.

The Persistent Challenge of Non-State Actors

In the current security environment, many states have shifted their focus from domestic stability towards addressing inter-state conflicts and maintaining state-centric security. This shift risks overlooking the persistent and evolving threat posed by non-state actors, particularly in regions like Southeast Asia, where groups such as JI have historically been active. The suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on 18 August serves as a stark reminder that non-state actors remain a potent threat even as states grapple with broader geopolitical tensions.

Singapore's Strategic Position and Security Concerns

Singapore's unique position as a financial hub and its proximity to Indonesia place it at the forefront of regional security concerns. As the primary financial centre in Southeast Asia, the city-state is an attractive target for extremist groups seeking to make a global statement. The disbandment of JI raises concerns about the potential radicalisation of Singaporean youths, given the possibility that disillusioned JI members could seek to re-establish networks in the region.

From a strategic perspective, Singapore's need to be vigilant is well-based. As the China-US competition intensifies, there is a risk that the city-state and other Southeast Asian nations may become more focused on state-centric security issues, inadvertently opening gaps in their counter-terrorism efforts, particularly if the threat posed by non-state actors like JI is underestimated.

Malaysia as a Potential Haven for Extremists

Malaysia has served as a significant transit and recruitment point for various extremist groups, including JI. Even as JI disbands, Malaysia's porous borders and well-established extremist networks continue to present challenges for counter-terrorism efforts. Some Indonesian nationals who attempted to join extremist groups in Marawi, Philippines, remain incarcerated in Malaysian prisons, highlighting the need for further regional collaboration.

The landscape in Malaysia is further complicated by its internal security concerns and political dynamics. Malaysia's focus on domestic stability, particularly in the face of economic and social pressures, could lead to a de-prioritisation of counter-terrorism efforts. This is especially concerning given the country's history as a terrorist recruitment hub. Any reduction in vigilance could inadvertently allow extremist ideologies to resurface.

Furthermore, in this emerging multipolar world, there is a risk that its focus may shift towards more traditional state security concerns, potentially leaving non-state threats such as JI under-addressed. This complex interplay between domestic and international pressures underscores the need for Malaysia to remain vigilant in its counter-terrorism efforts, even as it deals with broader geopolitical considerations.

Philippines' Persistent Insurgency and Security Challenges

The Philippines continues to grapple with a complex and multifaceted insurgency problem, particularly in the southern regions where groups like Abu Sayyaf and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters operate. JI's historical ties with these groups, coupled with the possibility of former members seeking refuge in the Philippines, present a significant challenge to regional security.

The strategic implications of the Philippines' internal security situation extend beyond its borders. How the country manages and contains insurgent activities directly affects regional stability. If former JI members were to integrate into local insurgent groups, the potential for a resurgence of violence in Mindanao or other parts of the country is high. This could lead to a broader regional crisis, particularly if the violence spills over into neighbouring countries or disrupts maritime security in the strategically vital waters of the Sulu and Celebes Seas.

From a security standpoint, the Philippines' focus on its external conflicts, particularly in its ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, may divert attention from the threat posed by non-state actors like JI. If the Philippines becomes overly focused on its state security concerns, it may inadvertently allow non-state actors to gain strength and influence, further complicating the regional security environment.

Middle East Influences and Regional Implications

The current conflict between Israel and Hamas adds another layer of complexity to the security landscape in Southeast Asia. The war has heightened tensions across the Muslim world, potentially serving as a source of inspiration for radical groups in Southeast Asia. JI's historical ties with the Middle East, mainly through training and ideological exchanges, mean that the ongoing conflict could resonate with former JI members and other extremists in the region.

There is also the concern that Southeast Asian fighters who have travelled to the Middle East may return with enhanced skills and radicalised ideologies, posing a renewed threat to regional security. This is particularly concerning for countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, where the return of such individuals could destabilise local communities and reignite extremist activities.

Conclusion: The Need for a Balanced Approach

The disbandment of JI in Indonesia presents opportunities and challenges for regional security. While it marks a significant step forward in counter-terrorism efforts, the potential for new threats to emerge based on disillusioned members and regional and domestic instability remains high.

As Southeast Asian nations navigate an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, there is a critical need to balance state-centric security concerns with the persistent threat posed by non-state actors. Non-state actors continue to pose significant threats, even as states focus on avoiding inter-state conflicts. A comprehensive security strategy integrating counter-terrorism efforts with broader geopolitical considerations is essential to ensure long-term peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

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