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Hearing on "Black Flags over Mindanao: Terrorism in Southeast Asia"

Testimony by

Michael Fuchs

Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear at today's important and timely hearing.

Terrorism in Southeast Asia is a serious challenge and a direct threat to the lives of innocent civilians in the region and to U.S. national security interests. The threat has existed in different forms for years, and the growth of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its attempts to expand into Southeast Asia has once again raised the profile of the danger in the region.

The United States has a direct interest in working with the countries of Southeast Asia to counter these threats. The most effective ways to do so include forging strong diplomatic partnerships, supporting economic growth and development, bolstering law enforcement and intelligence coordination, and spurring regional cooperation. At the heart of any strategy must be support for democratic, rights-respecting, tolerant societies. And the only way for the United States to be effective in countering terrorism in Southeast Asia is to invest in the diplomatic and development tools – personnel, programming, and platforms – necessary to implement these strategies.

The Threat

Terrorism has long been a threat in Southeast Asia, but that threat gained new prominence for U.S. policymakers in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Today, the battle between Philippines forces and fighters aligned with ISIS in the southern Philippines city of Marawi is the most recent example of the potential potency of the threat. These insurgencies are not new: the southern Philippine islands have experienced these threats since colonial times, making the region a periodic home for terrorist organizations. Other attacks in recent years have primarily occurred in Indonesia, including the bombing of a nightclub in Bali in 2002, the attack on the JW Marriott hotel in Jakarta in 2003, the bombing of the Australian embassy in Jakarta in 2004, and most recently a set of attacks in central Jakarta in 2016.

Today, the potential return home of Southeast Asian fighters who have fought in Iraq and Syria are raising fears that they might exacerbate an already dangerous network of terrorist groups in the region.

The governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, and others – including the United States – are focused on countering these threats. At last month's Shangri-La Dialogue it was clear that defense ministers from across Southeast Asia agreed that the "unprecedented" terrorism threat – in the words of Indonesian Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu – requires a more intense focus and increased regional cooperation.[1]

At the same time that countries grapple with the threat, it is important to place the dangers in context: terrorism is not existential for the governments in the region and it does not likely pose significant threats to the U.S. homeland at this time. In the

long run, managing this security challenge – and preventing it from growing into a more direct threat to U.S. interests – above all else requires capable governments that follow the rule of law, prioritize sustainable and equitable economic growth strategies, and which protect the values of human rights and tolerance and work to strengthen democratic institutions. Regional cooperation and support from the United States and other international actors can play key roles in these domestic efforts. This is a threat that – with focused and practical efforts – the United States can help these countries make real progress against.

Challenges

The countries of Southeast Asia face many challenges in addressing the terrorist threat, and the United States likewise faces real obstacles in supporting those countries in their counterterrorism efforts.

In Southeast Asia, governments are often hamstrung by a lack of development and governmental capacity. Poverty and a dearth of economic opportunities for certain communities can often provide ripe environments for terrorist organizations to find refuge and recruits. Government institutions are often lacking – from poor law enforcement training to intelligence capabilities to a weak rule of law – hindering the abilities of governments to effectively counter threats. Similarly, in some places – such as the southern Philippines – a lack of government control over the territory provides opportunities for terrorist groups to find safe haven. And porous borders throughout much of the region – including in between Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia – mean that terrorists can too often travel easily undetected.

The United States faces difficulties in working with the countries of Southeast Asia to counter the terrorist threat. The colonial pasts of many countries in the region result in intense sensitivity to foreign militaries operating in the region. And the United States too often over-militarizes its approach in ways that can make cooperation with governments more difficult. In addition, Southeast Asian governments perceive the United States as easily distracted from the challenges in Asia, which can cause wariness in the region about whether the United States will make good on long-term commitments to cooperate.

Similarly, the United States too often hampers its own counterterrorism efforts by adopting "us vs. them" rhetoric and actions that portray the United States as engaged in a battle with a religion rather than individual terrorist groups. On the campaign trail, one of the many offensive comments President Donald Trump made about Islam included stating that, "I think Islam hates us."[2] After President Trump unveiled his first "travel ban" in January 2017, pro-ISIS groups applauded the move because it would help them recruit followers. A retired CIA veteran, Robert Richer, called the travel ban a "strategic mistake" and "a win for jihadists and other anti-U.S. forces."[3]

One of the gravest self-inflicted wounds the U.S. could inflict on itself is following through on the Trump administration's proposal to drastically cut the size of the State Department and USAID. The most important tools in any counterterrorism strategy in Southeast Asia are diplomats, development professionals, and programming focused on supporting economic growth and capacity building. Cutting the State Department and USAID by roughly 30% – as the Trump administration has proposed – would irreparably damage our counterterrorism efforts in the region by reducing staff necessary for diplomatic efforts and programmatic resources available. As 120 retired generals and admirals put it in a February letter urging Congress to "ensure that resources for the International Affairs Budget keep pace with the growing global threats and opportunities we face," the military "needs strong civilian partners in the battle against the drivers of extremism – lack of opportunity, insecurity, injustice and hopelessness."[4] Rather than taking a careful look at the budget to determine how best to maximize resources to tackle specific problems like counterterrorism, the Trump administration is letting artificial reduction goals drive national security decision-making – a dangerous approach.[5]

Another challenge for the United States is making sure that counterterrorism efforts in the region in no way condone or aid in efforts by governments in Southeast Asia to repress their own citizens. Most countries in Southeast Asia have histories of repressive dictatorships that clamped down on dissent and individual liberties under the guise of security needs. Similar challenges exist today, including in the Philippines where President Rodrigo Duterte is ignoring human rights in his campaign against drugs, and in Thailand where the government is run by a former general who overthrew the previous, democratically elected government. Similarly, in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere, there is often a tenuous balance between efforts to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies and protecting freedom of speech.

While the United States needs to work with many of these regional governments on issues like counterterrorism, the United States will only exacerbate the problem by actively working with governments in ways that could harm innocent civilians and further strengthen autocratic policies and tendencies.

Recommendations

The United States has a number of tools with which to help the countries of Southeast Asia counter the terrorist threat, and there are a series of steps the United States can take to make more progress.

First, the United States must strengthen its diplomatic capacities in Southeast Asia, including through more personnel and resources. Fundamentally, preventing terrorist attacks boils down to having the best intelligence possible about potential threats, and the best intelligence comes from close working partnerships with countries where terrorists may be at work. This is why U.S. diplomats and the work

of the State Department are central to counterterrorism efforts in Southeast Asia (and around the world) – they are almost always the front line officials in working with other countries to prevent and combat these threats. They often know best what is happening in these countries, have the best relationships with foreign counterparts, and are best positioned to develop locally tailored strategies to prevent terrorism. Likewise, development professionals and programs support economic growth and strengthen the rule of law in less developed areas, which can dry up opportunities for terrorist groups to recruit. The United States should be ramping up investments in diplomatic and development personnel and resources across the board.

Second, the United States must prioritize support for democratic, rights-respecting governments and societies in Southeast Asia. The stronger the democratic institutions, rule of law, and tolerance in these countries, the more effective they will be at preventing terrorism and the more resilient they will be in weathering any threats. The United States can best support democratic institutions and societies in the region through robust partnerships with governments that prioritize those interests and through specific programming to help countries build democratic institutions, carry out free and fair elections, and promote education and tolerance. In some instances when regional partners are damaging their country's democratic institutions and values – including now with the governments of the Philippines and Thailand – the United States will need make sure that: regional partners understand the United States prioritizes democracy and human rights; specific cooperation on threats like terrorism in no way aid the regime's undemocratic actions; and that certain assistance and engagement can be postponed or cut off if rights violations persist.

Third, the United States needs to support the institutional capacity of partner governments in Southeast Asia. The United States will not be effective in addressing terrorist threats in the region if the countries of Southeast Asia cannot adequately handle these challenges – and they cannot adequately do so if they do not have a robust rule of law, judiciary systems, and well trained and equipped law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The United States should look carefully at how best to ramp up targeted assistance programming to support countries developing legal frameworks for combating terrorism and training law enforcement and intelligence officials, to name a couple of examples.

Fourth, the United States should invest in economic growth and development in the region. While the region overall is growing economically, millions of people remain impoverished and living in communities cut off from economic opportunities and where people are too often susceptible to terrorist propaganda. Widespread corruption only exacerbates the lack of opportunity, derailing infrastructure projects, trade and investment.[6] In the Philippines, the Mindanao region is home to the highest proportion of poor in the country[7]—and it is no coincidence that Mindanao is also the site of continued fighting between the Philippine government and terrorist insurgents. A wide range of U.S. programs run by USAID, State, and the

Millennium Challenge Corporation can play significant roles in helping to support the efforts of regional governments to expand opportunity for their own citizens, and should receive additional resources. Educational and cultural exchanges like the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) also provide opportunities for individuals that can leave positive impacts in their communities.[8]

Fifth, the U.S. should only use the military sparingly and judiciously. The U.S. military can help prevent terrorist acts when used carefully and in conjunction with other tools. For instance, U.S. military cooperation – including military assistance, training, and the deployment of Special Operations forces – with the Philippines to counter terrorist threats has helped reduce the threats in the south.[9] But the United States must be very cautious about using the military for counterterrorism operations in Southeast Asia because the appearance of military cooperation to combat domestic threats in the region is highly controversial and can easily backfire, making governments less supportive of receiving U.S. support. Again, massive reductions in the budgets of the State Department and USAID will likely push the Pentagon to take a more pro-active role in these efforts in the region, which could be counterproductive.

Sixth, the Unites States should support regional and international efforts that can strengthen cooperation amongst the countries of Southeast Asia in combating terrorism. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has numerous mechanisms to enable cross-border cooperation, and the United States can support the convening and training of law enforcement officials, diplomats, intelligence and defense officials to coordinate their efforts and share lessons learned. The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) is an international grouping dedicated to sharing best practices for combating terrorism and radicalization. Indonesia is the only Southeast Asian country in the GCTF, and the United States should encourage others to join. And the United States can also increasingly encourage other regional partners – including Australia and Japan – to invest more resources in counterterrorism and development efforts in Southeast Asia.

And seventh, the United States should engage with the countries and peoples of the region as partners instead of lecturing and criticizing. The United States must pursue partnerships with the countries of Southeast Asia by tailoring unique strategies to each environment, and help governments increase their commitments to human rights, the rule of law, and tolerance. Some of the actions and rhetoric from President Trump – including his "travel ban" and language in his speech last week in Warsaw calling for the defense of the "west" and "our civilization" – only deepen suspicions of some in Muslim-majority countries and provide propaganda tools for terrorists. People around the world look to the United States for leadership and to uphold universal values, and so the United States must act in both word and deed to strengthen those universal values, not foster perceptions of an "us vs. them" mentality.

Thank you.

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