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EXAMINING ASEAN OUR EYES DEALING WITH REGIONAL CONTEXT IN COUNTER TERRORISM, RADICALISM, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Abstract

ASEAN currently contends with the global context emerging dynamically which brings about multidimensional challenges and threats. Dealing with this circumstances, ASEAN member states strengthen its capacity by enhancing regional cooperation and strategic information exchange among ASEAN member states so-called ASEAN Our Eyes. This initiative adopted for the sake of forestalling any possible threat posed by terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism through timely strategic information exchange among ASEAN member states. This study will be analyzed with Regional Security Complex and International Cooperation theories to examine ASEAN Our Eyes based on its Terms of Reference (TOR). By using a qualitative method, the result of this study portrays that ASEAN Our Eyes is able to undermine the gaps in the realm of strategic information exchange in monitoring the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, violent

extremists, radicals, and crime-terror nexus. However, it remains premature as a strategic measure to encounter those threats in the upcoming years.

Keywords

Regional Cooperation, Counter Terrorism, Radicalism, Violent Extremism, ASEAN Our Eyes, Strategic Information Exchange

1. Introduction

Enjoying a stable security within its region for the last 50 years, ASEAN nowadays contends with the global context emerging dynamically which has brought about new challenges and threats such as terrorism, radicalism, violent extremism and other non-traditional threats. These threats currently have shifted from domestic scale to the regional and global scale so that it requires collective action and response through cooperation and shared capabilities among ASEAN member states, particularly exchanging strategic information to support operations in the field (ADMM, 2018).

First of all, terrorism threat in Southeast Asia has increased since ISIS attempt to build a new branch as a stronger operational area. The indication of ISIS in Southeast Asia was marked by the appointment of the Abu Sayyaf leader 'Isnilon Hapilton' by Abu Bakar Al Baghdadi in the Philippines in 2016 to establish the Islamic Caliphate in Southeast Asia so-called *Wilayat*. The *Wilayat* will be used as a base for militants in Southeast Asia which against the country's nationalistic, foundational, and philosophical approach to build Islamic states upon their return from the Middle East (Amin, 2018; Bunk, 2019).

In terms of radicalism, there are several pockets of Islamic radicalism and longstanding violent separatist movements over the past 30 years based in Southeast Asia. In particular, these threats were dreadful throughout the 2000s, when several incidents in Indonesia caused hundreds of Indonesian and dozens of Westerners die. However, the threat seemingly diminished in the late 2000s until the early 2010s owing to the fact that Southeast Asian governments succeed to fight against violent militancy and the decreasing some of the most influential terrorist groups (Congressional Research Service, 2016).

Nowadays, the rise of Islamophobia is a grace for the media. It is due to the fact that reports and news relating to Islam and terrorism attract more people's attention (Al Mannan & Shamrir, 2017). Furthermore, it is equally important to acknowledge that violent extremism in Southeast Asia emerged particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines which evolving by using

social media platforms for propaganda, fundraising, and disseminating teaching material in different ways. Furthermore, it could not be denied that social media has enabled extremists based in Southeast Asia to create a clear brand with associated symbols and messages to engage new supporters. Despite facing the same threats, Indonesia has been undoubtedly more advanced than the Philippines in the realm of engaging the law enforcement and fostering the link with technology platforms which successfully repressing the circulation of extremist propaganda online (Nuraniyah, 2019).

This research is important to be conducted considering terrorism and other non-traditional threats continue to evolve so that the identification process becomes difficult. Another point is the lack of projections related to those threats caused many elements of surprise. Furthermore, counterterrorism cooperation in ASEAN has several challenges such as the differences of national interests and the legal framework, the principle of non-interference, and the distrust among member countries. This can affect the implementation of *ASEAN Our Eyes* as a strategic information exchange platform to counter-terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism. Therefore, ASEAN leaders are committed to preventing the various threats in Southeast Asia by amplifying cooperative efforts through *ASEAN Our Eyes*. In this paper, *ASEAN Our Eyes* will be examined to undermine the gaps of strategic information exchange among ASEAN member states.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Regional Security Complex (RSC)

This theory emphasizes the significance of regional elements in understanding the dynamics of international security. Buzan delineates a security complex as a group of countries that have proximity and make primary security which cannot be separated from each other (1991, p. 190). The significant part in the RSC according to Buzan is the interdependence and relations of security cooperation among states in the region. Regardless of the fact that Buzan does not deny the existence of relations which are always colored by rivalry, the balance of power, different kinds of alliances, and the inclusion of external forces in them. Above all, this framework logic is originated from the fact that all countries in the system are entangled in a global network of security interdependence (Buzan B. , 2003, p. 141). Therefore, this theory is very suitable to analyze ASEAN regional context where each ASEAN Member State as a unit of analysis carries its own national interests within the ASEAN cooperation framework. In addition,

each ASEAN Member State also has relationships with other organizations where interdependent relations emerge as a form of RSC.

2.2 International Cooperation

In general, cooperation appears when actors adapt their actions to the real or expected preferences of other actors. While international cooperation defines interactions for achieving common goals and providing the actors with gains or rewards (Paulo, 2014; Milner, 1992). The common goals need not be the same goal to all of the actors involved whereas the gains need not be similar in measure for each state (Milner, 1992). In this context, each ASEAN Member State will help each other to achieve their goals by adjusting their policies in expecting their own rewards. This theory is properly used since the main goal of adopting *ASEAN Our Eyes* system is to strengthen the existing cooperation in tackling terrorism and other non-traditional threats. Moreover, this system is expected to weaken the gaps of the strategic information exchange in anticipating any possible threat posed by terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism.

3. Methodology

The research method employed in this paper is a qualitative method with phenomenological approach. Author seeking to find out research substance discussed by understanding the signification, process, and connection of the unit analysis (Devine, 2002, pp. 197-215). *ASEAN Our Eyes* system achieves in response to the phenomenon that emerged in the region such as terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism as well the challenges of global dynamics.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Regional Context in Southeast Asia

According to the Congressional Research Service Report (2016), Southeast Asia is a region with more than 625 million inhabitants and approximately 15% of Muslim population in the globe. This region has been threatened by terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalism for ages. There are several aspects causing Southeast Asia very vulnerable to regional and global terrorist attacks including:

- a) the Southeast Asian region has very porous land and sea borders making it suitable for smuggling weapons and people;

- b) the close relations between several ASEAN member states and western countries, especially Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines make them perfect as a substitute object for anti-American aggression;
- c) Extremists are able to quickly eliminate the large Islamic demographic environment (Indonesia nowadays boasts the substantial Muslim inhabitants worldwide);
- d) the existence of political corruption and economic matters throughout the region that affect internal security measures;
- e) Southeast Asia as a center for global trade and tourism has a highly developed transportation and funding infrastructure that is effective for legal purposes and even illegal purposes to launch acts of terrorism in the region (Chalk, 2002).

There are several terrorist incidents in Southeast Asia since 2016-2018 which delineated on the **Figure 1** below.

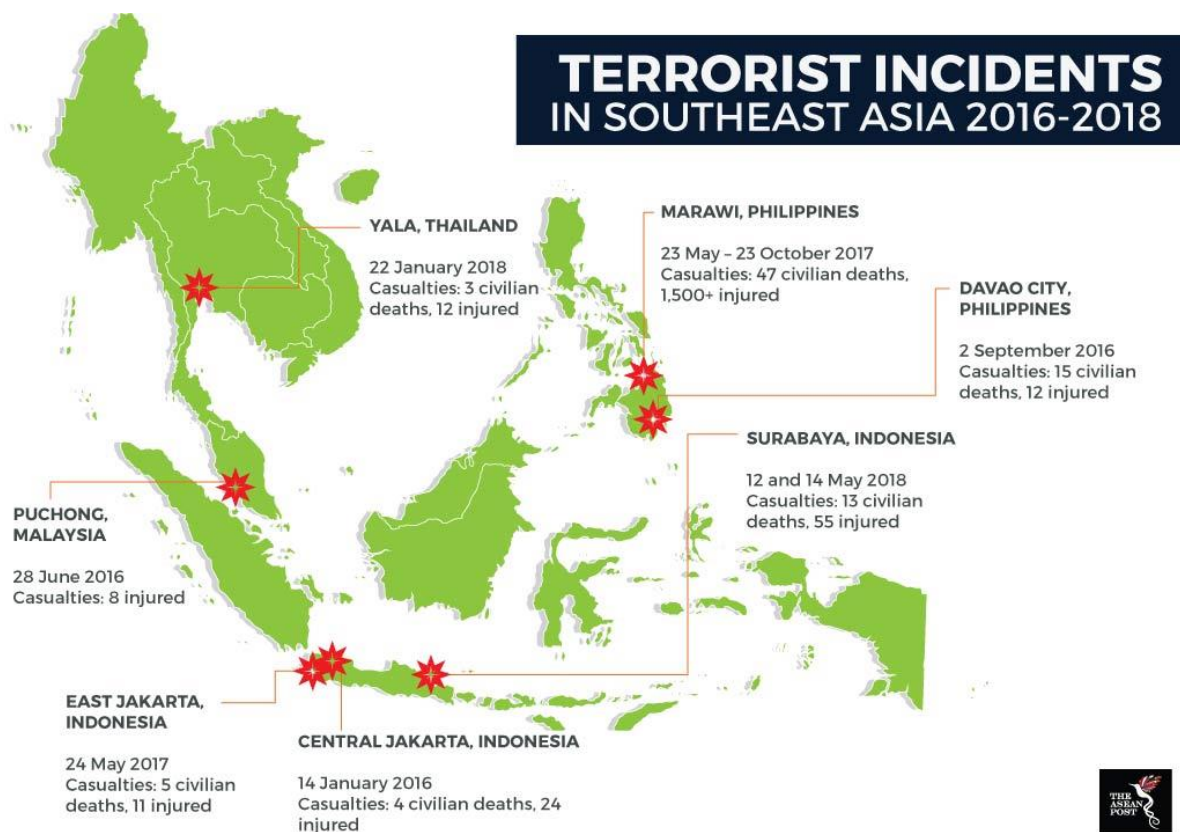


Figure 1: *Terrorist Incidents in Southeast Asia 2016-2018*

Malaysia as a country located in a region has three strong hubs of terrorism, which are Marawi in the Philippines, Arakan in Myanmar, and the southern province of Thailand (Habulan,

et.al, 2018). The terrorist attack in Malaysia can be seen on the tragedy of Movida chain bar in the commercial district of Puchong, a city 30 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur which suffered a grenade attack that injured eight people on 28 June 2016 (Chi, 2017). Therefore, in order to wipe out the IS threats, Malaysia decided to arrest individuals who have affiliation with Filipino Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) within its country.

Furthermore, in 2017, IS fighters intended to rule the parts of Marawi City in the Philippines for five months in a long battle which killed over 1,170 people, including more than 960 militants (Habulan, et.al, 2018). The IS leadership was hoping support to generate the Islamic city's narrative opposing the 'oppressive' Catholic state in the Philippines. It is just like to militants in the Levant where the terrorists controlling Marawi also ready to achieve 'martyrdom' and heavenly rewards of their death (Habulan, et.al, 2018).

Meanwhile, in 2018, ISIS carried out several new terrorist attacks in Indonesia such as: suicide bombing of a family of six, including four children, targeted three churches in Surabaya city which killed at least 13 and injuring over 40 churchgoers (Llewellyn, 2018). The character of terrorism in Indonesia tends to be a form of resistance to the political conditions, ideological difference, and wrong understanding of religious teaching (Sumardiana, 2017).

In light of radicalism, it tends to expose the series of tactics by Daesh sympathizers, supporters and active recruiters as the spectrum of confrontation actions ranging from utilizing non-violent force and coercion to the acts of violent extremism. The ability of Daesh is applied through the utilizing of local terror groups and the Foreign Terrorist Fighters which come back to their home country in order to improve its ideological purpose (Samuel, 2016). Since ISIS was defeated and depressed, many FTF groups moved to the Philippines and their respective countries of origin (Suryanto, 2018, p. 46).

Table 1: The Interception or the Estimated Number of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Travel since 2012 (Data from Member Countries, per October 2017)

| | Travelled to & arrived in the Syrian Arab Republic/ Iraq | Percentage women and children | Returned from the Syrian Arab Republic/ Iraq | Prevented from leaving home country | Prevented from continuing travel by Turkey |
|--------------------|--|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| Bangladesh | 40 | - | - | - | - |
| Indonesia | 671 | 31 % (208) | 84 | 66 | 639 |
| Malaysia | 95 | 30 % (29) | 8 | - | 265 |
| Maldives | 49 | - | - | 47 | 5 |
| Philippines | 4 | - | - | - | - |

Source: United Nations, 2018

As data shown above, the nature of terrorism is transnational so there is no single country can fight against terrorism without conducting international cooperation. Paulo (2014) believes that international cooperation occurs as interactions for achieving common goals in tackling terrorism and non-traditional threats. It is due to the fact that terrorist groups like IS are quick to prey on those who have been marginalized and promote their extremist cause as an ‘us versus them’ narrative. Another fact that many scholars demonstrate a plethora of immigrants and diaspora whom participating in domestic politics and civic engagement in various ranges, such as giving support to the political parties in their homeland and stimulating separatist movements and insurgent groups (Chaudhary & Moss, 2019). When the states continue to fight against Islamic terrorist groups in tandem, Muslim immigrants become one of the targets of a terror-industrial complex on a regular basis (Rana, 2016) which potentially threatens national security and culture (Nail, 2016). Moreover, radicalization efforts of the terror groups are also vastly done through the internet and social media sites which eases the spreading of their ideology (Gnanasagar, 2018). Now more than ever, it is necessary to amplify cooperation across the region to weed out terrorists and stifle their extremist agendas.

4.2 ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE)

The basis of *ASEAN Our Eyes* was created during the 12th ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) on 19th October 2018 in Singapore when the Ministers have agreed to adopt the *Our Eyes Initiative* as a platform for strategic information exchange among the AMS. Parameswaran (2019) explains that obtaining its name from the ‘Five Eyes’, an intelligence network which belongs to the US and its five Western allies, OEI was firstly proposed by Indonesia Defense Minister to be a platform of information sharing within ASEAN member

states. The platform was designed to facilitate the exchange of intelligence on terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism in the region. OEI initially discussed about terrorism threats in three countries between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in line with the comprehensive trilateral cooperation. Moreover, it was discussed as part of larger multilateral discussion including the first joint working group meeting.

ASEAN Our Eyes is a system which used by ASEAN Member States (AMS) in order to monitor the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, violent extremist, radicals and the crime-terror nexus (ADMM, 2019b). Through timely strategic information exchange amongst AMS, the data of domestic and international information or intelligence sources that may include military and other relevant agencies will be collected by the authorized officials of the respective AMS.

4.3 ASEAN Our Eyes: Analysis Review Strategy

Buzan (2003) used the terms of amity or enmity in the level of analysis as a foothold to weigh security in Southeast Asia which represent the spectrum for friendship or alliance. To analyze the relationship of ASEAN countries with their alliance, we should acknowledge that these relationships are driven by both norms and interests (Schunz, Gstöhl, & Langenhove, 2018). There are several ASEAN member states which have specific relations with certain countries. As an illustration, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines have a closer partnership with the USA. It is undeniable fact that most of those ASEAN country's interests stem from America's political impetus. On the other hand, Cambodia, Lao, and Myanmar have a close relationship with China; while Vietnam is close to Russia. From those relationships, it shows that ASEAN has diverse internal political circumstances and relations either with outside powers (especially United States) or among ASEAN countries which constructed a divergent viewpoint of friend and enemy. Thus, it is difficult to achieve regional cooperation.

However, ASEAN has several norms in which one of them is a non-interference principle. This norm is vitally important for ASEAN Member States since it concerns domestic security. Southeast Asia region tends to be the source of national security threats due to the diversity of the race, religion, and culture which integrated with the weak state structures; and lack of strong government legitimacy. As a consequence, the goal of non-interference policy is to prevent domestic issues driven by foreign matters (Corthay, 2016).

In this case, violent extremism becomes one of the security threats for ASEAN where Islamic extremists eager to establish the Islamic state based in Southeast Asia. Nowadays,

extremist groups have evolved by using the internet (social media) in order to enhance their networks (Nuraniyah, 2019). Not only to recruit new followers but also to raise financial support more easily compared to the previous generations. This kind of violent extremist will affect domestic politics and the complicatedness of conflict-impacted countries (Raleigh & Linke, 2017). Hence, enhancing the existing cooperation is absolutely needed to deal with this regional issue.

ASEAN countries which potentially affected by violent extremism are Indonesia (the largest Muslim population in the world), Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Southern Philippines, and Southern Thailand (Rogozhina, 2015). Moreover, Laura Steckman (2015) in her study of *Myanmar at the Crossroads: The Shadow of Jihadist Extremism*, notes that the Myanmar government's vigilance to the threat of terrorism caused the immediate prospect of extremists impossibly to enforce their radical ideologies. However, the threat should be overcome seeing that the militant jihadist existed in Myanmar and the history of inter-communal strain among various groups as well as right-wing Buddhist nationalism remains occurred.

Concerning to Cambodia, Vietnam and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), these countries have never been faced with serious terror threats for the time being. However, the Royal Government of Cambodia has taken a plethora of pivotal measures as the regional response. One of the responses is by collaborating with their counterparts on several counter-radicalization initiatives, such as attending a seminar as well as involving in other educational programs (ASEAN Security Outlook, 2015). Furthermore, Lao PDR has broadened and deepened its cooperation with all friendly countries, regional, and worldwide organizations to gain mutual understanding, confidence, and trust in Southeast Asia as well as in the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2015). Moreover, Vietnam advocates to organize confidence-building measures for the sake of general interests of countries and regions on the principle of mutual understanding and respect. Based on the mapping of national interests explained above, there is interdependency among the AMS since they are bound in the ASEAN system.

ASEAN has overcome the terrorism-related issues in the entire levels, including national, bilateral, or multilateral level. It is due to the fact that terrorism is recognized as the threat towards regional and international peace, stability, and economic growth. The primary framework in combating terrorism in ASEAN was marked by the signing of the ASEAN

Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT) on 13 January 2007 in Manila by all member states of ASEAN. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2015).

According to Gunaratna (2018), ASEAN has provided an ideal system for the authorities and their partners to develop international cooperation on counter-terrorism. There have been several existing international cooperation in Southeast Asia, such as Malacca Strait Patrol, Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement, and Maritime Security cooperation in the Gulf of Thailand. However, it requires accurate, timely, and updated intelligence support. Therefore, Indonesia initiated the Strategic Information Exchange namely *Our Eyes Initiative* to foster cooperation in the field of non-traditional security threats, such as: terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism (ADMM, 2018).

Another point is, the regional prospect could infringe each other's jurisdiction and contribute to domestic unsteadiness because it resisted domestic exposure to fight against terrorism in Southeast Asia which caused anxiety for AMS. The involvement of America in the region has led some states to resist intensive multilateral cooperation (Chow, 2005). In examining *ASEAN Our Eyes*, it needs to be underlined that cooperation in ASEAN refers to the principle of non-interference. Although there are several ASEAN member states which have specific relations to the specific countries and some of them are not directly facing the potential threats, it will not affect *ASEAN Our Eyes* system as a strategic information exchange that only be utilized within the internal ASEAN Member States.

4.4 Implementation Strategy

There have been existing system and mechanisms to ensure greater cooperation, including: ASEAN Direct Infrastructure Arrangement (ADI) and ASEAN 365 platforms. ADI is a platform which used by ASEAN Defense Ministers with one another in order to achieve mutual decisions in terms of dealing with an emergency or critical situations through the permanent, rapid, reliable, and confidential communication platform. This platform has expanded by involving the plus countries to fulfill the overarching goal of shaping ASEAN as a rule-based and inclusive community that will respond effectively to emerging challenges in a dynamic region and play a responsible and constructive role globally while maintaining ASEAN centrality (ADMM, 2019a). In the future, ADI would use a video conference in order to make it easier for the ASEAN Defense Ministers to communicate in emergency situations.

Meanwhile, ASEAN 365 platform is information-sharing which enabled real-time intelligence sharing through a collective database and interactive network. This initiative was

adopted by Brunei Darussalam that aimed to produce the collaborative effort among ASEAN Militaries Analyst-to-Analyst Intelligence Exchange (AMAAIE) in 2015 and would include features of terrorist group database, watch list, social media feeds, and enabled interactivity through chat-rooms and Requests for Information (RFIs). This platform has become as a means to address the lack of regularity and institutionalization (AMIIM, 2016).

In the future, there will be arranged other mechanisms such as Counter-Terrorism Information Facility (CTIF) which will be established in Singapore, Counter-Terrorism Consultation Meeting from 5 countries plus Australia and any other relevant platforms. In addition, the AOE also should be based on mutually beneficial information exchanges amongst AMS with regard to the risks and threats posed by violent extremism, radicalism, and terrorism facing the AMS. On top of that, the AOE should respect cultural values sensitivities in order to maintain cordial cooperation (ADMM, 2019b).

Consequently, there will be some considerations for future arrangements of the AOE implementation including: Establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the operationalization of the AOE within twelve months from the adoption of the Terms of Reference; Establishing security protocol to ensure information, communication, and infrastructure which will be used for the AOE; and the last is in the absence of AOE SOP and in matter of expediency to overcome urgent situation exchange of intelligence information sharing should utilize the existing mechanism between AMS (ADMM, 2019b). Therefore, the AOE still be considered as a premature of a strategic measure to encounter those threats in the upcoming years seeing that AOE is a new system that still requires SOP and security protocol to be conducted among AMS.

5. Conclusion

As has been noted, it needs to be underlined that cooperation in ASEAN refers to the principle of a non-interference. Although there are several ASEAN member states which are not facing the potential threats directly or some of them have specific relations to the specific countries, it will not affect *ASEAN Our Eyes* system as a strategic information exchange since this system will only be utilized by the internal ASEAN Member States. Therefore, *ASEAN Our Eyes* is able to undermine the gaps in the realm of strategic information exchange in monitoring the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, radicalism, violent extremism, and crime-terror nexus. However, the platform remains premature as a strategic measure to encounter those threats in the

upcoming years. The limitation of this research is that the implementation of *ASEAN Our Eyes* has not been able to be analyzed yet because this platform has just been formed and adopted by ASEAN countries. Therefore, it is expected that further research should be carried out to examine the implementation of strategic information exchange through *ASEAN Our Eyes*.

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