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THE MILITARY AND COUNTER-TERRORISM

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FOR all of the successes governments have claimed in their respective struggles against terrorist organisations, one thing remains clear – the threat of terrorist attacks remains clear and present. In Southeast Asia, the various measures respective governments have put in place to combat regional terrorist organisations have met with what can only be seen as mixed results. The recent Bali attack indicates that there remains much to be done in this struggle against terrorist organisations. The obvious temptation is to ask – what more can be done?

As the recent Indonesian experience demonstrates, very often, the temptation is to call in the military. At first glance, this makes sense. Nevertheless, reflecting upon the deployment of the military to the troubles in southern Thailand, unless governments are careful in the extent to which they rely on their respective military organisations in their counter-terror struggles, increasing reliance on the military may eventually prove to be counter-productive.

Why Calling in the Military Makes Sense

Counter-terrorism is time-consuming and manpower-intensive. There is, hypothetically, an almost endless number of potential terrorist target sets, ranging from crowded urban centres, to high-value government installations such as power grids, symbols of national power such as government buildings and other installations. It is well nigh impossible for governments to protect all potential terrorist targets. Military organisations, however, are almost always the largest, most well funded and most well equipped of government organisations. Tapping this reservoir of manpower resources for counter-terrorism efforts therefore appears to make sense.

Furthermore, the military, typically, possesses many of the skill sets required in this struggle against terrorist organisations. Military personnel are trained in the martial arts – whether armed or unarmed; the military is almost always also the most disciplined of organisations. It is no accident that captured videos of terrorist training resembles many of the drills that soldiers consider to be their bread and butter.

Finally, there are many military roles and missions that are not entirely dissonant with counter-terrorism efforts. Inasmuch as terrorist bases and facilities can be located, these can be attacked and destroyed by either the careful insertion of trained military operatives or the precise application of standoff-range firepower. The identification and monitoring of such

terrorist facilities or bases requires sophisticated intelligence and surveillance capabilities that typically are the speciality of the military organisation. Even the more passive counter-terror measures – such as the guarding of critical infrastructure – resonates with that most mind-numbingly boring yet necessary of military tasks – the provision of guard and sentry posts.

Using the Military in Counter-Terrorism – Potential Problems

However, a cautionary note is needed. There is a fundamental difference between the principles of counter-terrorism and the principles of war that military organisations typically apply.

The military mindset involves a more or less proactive security problem-solving stance. Military organisations typically want to find the security threats, fix these threats in their existing locations, and then bring to bear against these threats overwhelming offensive military power. In other words, military organisation want to find the location of the security threats to the country, and then attack and destroy these threats. There is a finite time-line involved. Furthermore, it is relatively easy to determine success – find the threat, attack it, destroy it, and the job is done. In a conflict against an armed forces of another country, this is of course possible, inasmuch as the military has the ability to project military power deep into its opponent's national territory.

There is a reason why soldiers find passive defence missions – such as sentry duty – so mind-numbingly boring, and debilitating to the martial spirit. It simply goes against the proactive, finite time-line mindset that military organisations have towards security problems. Terrorist organisations probably do not function in the same manner as rival military organisations, even if many of their training methods are borrowed from military training protocols. If terrorist bases were so easy to locate and destroy, then surely the problem of terrorism would not be as intractable as it seems. On the rare occasions, when intelligence sources can accurately locate terrorist bases, then military power can be brought to bear to destroy these facilities. However, counter-terrorism efforts more often than not resemble the more passive security measures, such as the provision of guards and sentries at critical infrastructure and installations. Such efforts resemble policing duties rather more than the proactive military operations described above. Policing requires different measures of success from military operations; in the former, success is probably measured by the decreasing rates of crime – just as in counter-terrorism, success is determined by the absence of terrorist attacks.

This means it is imperative that the lead government agencies in this counter-terror effort must be the law enforcement instruments, not the military organisation. In other words, military organisations must be subordinate to their law enforcement counterparts, not vice versa. And yet, precisely because military organisations tend to command the lion's share of national spending and larger manpower resources than their law enforcement counterparts, this runs against the grain of existing domestic political balances between the law enforcement and military organisations. Clearly this is a relationship that will require quite significant monitoring by the political authorities of the country.

What happens if the military mindset predominates over law enforcement in counter-terrorism? The likely outcome probably resembles that of many failed counter-insurgency campaigns (and counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency are close parallels). No where is the problem of letting the military 'run amok' in counter-terrorism more evident than in the continuing problems in southern Thailand, where military heavy-handedness has made what

was an essentially local and low-level problem increasingly escalate to the point where terrorist organisations are apparently beginning to see southern Thailand – a region terrorist organisations had usually ignored – as their next major battle ground or recruitment opportunity.

Prospects

In that respect, the Indonesian decision to deploy the military in the country's counter-terrorism campaign portends as much promise as it does peril. Thus far, it seems clear that the military role will be restricted to its re-activation of its traditional networks of local informants as a major potential counter-terrorist intelligence resource. To reiterate, Jakarta will have to ensure that its military organisation can re-engineer its mindset away from finite time-lines, from clearly distinguishable enemy locations, from easily measured signals of operational success. More fundamentally, the government will have to ensure that the lead role remains within the ambit of the law enforcement agencies and not the military organisation. The struggle against the terrorist organisations that blight the security landscape of Southeast Asia is necessarily a long-term affair, one that is not susceptible to quick fixes. As long as the military organisation can adapt to these strikingly different characteristics, eventual success is within the grasp of countries plagued by terrorist threats. Otherwise, the potential solution – deploying the military in counter-terrorism operations – can threaten to become more the problem than the solution.

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