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Tilting at Dominos: America and Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Last winter, the streets of downtown Manila more closely resembled an American college campus during the 1960s than the commerce-driven center of a modern Southeast Asian city. Near the American embassy, protesters shouted that the United States, which was increasing military aid to the Philippines as part of the war on terror, wanted to dominate its former colony, and that the assistance would strengthen the unpopular Philippine military. Across town at the University of the Philippines, moderate Muslims—although primarily Catholic, the Philippines possesses a sizable Muslim minority—expressed skepticism that Islamist insurgents were linked to international terror networks and concern that an increased American presence would boost support for Philippine radicals. Near the protesters, pro-United States demonstrators called out that the Philippines’ underfunded army desperately needed aid to crush domestic militants like the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamist group known for kidnapping and beheading civilians.

The wide range of opinions expressed that day about America’s counterterrorism strategies in Southeast Asia is not unusual. Over the past year, as evidence has mounted that international terrorist organizations have infiltrated Southeast Asia, American officials have turned their attention toward Southeast Asian policymaking—something largely ignored since the end of the Vietnam War—and have declared Southeast Asia the “second front” in the global campaign against terror, identified terrorist

groups concealed among Southeast Asia’s Muslims, alleged that these groups are linked to Al Qaeda, and pressured Southeast Asian governments to crack down on terror. As part of this campaign, Washington has expressed its willingness to lend support to Southeast Asian militaries, and has backed Southeast Asian leaders who have autocratic tendencies.

Although the region’s armed forces are poorly trained and the willingness of some Southeast Asian leaders to battle terror is admirable, the anti-government protesters may be correct: in the long run the United States probably has chosen the wrong course. Backing Southeast Asia’s often brutal and compromised militaries, which themselves contain elements linked to Islamist radicals, will only boost human rights abuses, breeding popular resentment and setting the stage for more terror. In fact, America’s support of corrupt Southeast Asian armies and repressive leaders could be an even worse mistake than its support of similar leaders in Central and South Asia, where autocrats have at least demonstrated a willingness to cut ties to Islamist radicals. Moreover, many of the Southeast Asian militaries and civilian leaders backed by Washington appear unable to distinguish among domestic opposition groups, instead cracking down on all opponents of their regimes, no matter whether the opposition is secular or Islamist, peaceful or violent.

AL QAEDA’S TENTACLES

After September 11, 2001, and the revelation that Malaysia may have been a staging point for the attacks, the Bush administration trained its sights on Southeast Asia. Washington’s focus only intensified as intelligence reports issued in fall 2001 sug-

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gested that Al Qaeda members were fleeing Afghanistan for Southeast Asia. American officials decided to target militants moving to the region and indigenous terrorist groups developing links to the “Islamist International.”

Yet in fall 2001, many Southeast Asia experts and Southeast Asian leaders expressed doubt that large-scale terrorism had become a serious problem in the region. Prominent Indonesia specialist Harold Crouch of the International Crisis Group declared that Al Qaeda did not exist in Indonesia. Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri avoided a political confrontation with leading Islamists, even after American officials warned her that Indonesian militants were planning large-scale attacks on civilians and assassination plots against Megawati herself. (Avoiding problems has long been Megawati’s style; as vice president in 2000, she was tasked with resolving conflict in eastern Indonesia but spent her time shopping in Hong Kong instead.) Megawati’s vice president, Hamzah Haz, even shared dinner with Abu Bakar Bashir, leader of Jemaah Islamiya, a militant group the United States believes is linked to Al Qaeda.

But over the past year, Islamist militants have proved these experts wrong. At Al Qaeda safe houses in Afghanistan, reporters and American soldiers found documents containing information about Southeast Asian groups, including the Abu Sayyaf. CNN journalists in Afghanistan even discovered a tape containing footage of an Al Qaeda-linked terrorist training camp in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

These militants have not just led training exercises. Throughout 2002, explosions rocked the southern Philippines and metropolitan Manila, killing more than 20 Filipinos and at least 1 American soldier. Philippine intelligence linked these bombings to the Abu Sayyaf and other militant groups with ties to Al Qaeda. Working from evidence gleaned from an Al Qaeda safe house in Afghanistan, in December 2001 Singapore arrested 13 men. According to Singaporean police, the men had completed reconnaissance of Western embassies in the city-state and laid plans to drive fertilizer bombs into the American, Australian, British, and Israeli missions. In June 2002, Indonesian authorities arrested Islamic cleric Omar al-Faruq, a Kuwaiti, and moved him to the United States-run Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. There, al-Faruq told investigators he was an Al Qaeda member sent to Southeast Asia to unite local radical groups and plan large-scale attacks against United States interests. Meanwhile, in October 2002, Singaporean intelligence discovered plots to attack Western shipping interests in the Straits of Malacca.

Most notably, the massive October 2002 bombing on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, which killed at least 200 people, served notice that large-scale terrorism committed by groups with global links has become a major threat to the region’s stability and development. The style of the Bali bombing was consistent with Al Qaeda’s tactics. The attack required careful planning, the bombs were placed to maximize casualties, and the perpetrators attempted to detonate simultaneous explosions, targeting not only discos in Kuta, but also the American consulate in Denpasar, Bali’s major city. Economists predicted that the attack would slice as much as 2 percent off Indonesia’s annual growth—tourism accounted for 5 percent of Indonesia’s GDP in 2001—and deter future foreign investment in Southeast Asia.

A MILITARY CORDON SANITAIRE . . .

Since focusing on the region, Washington has expended some resources on improving Southeast Asian law enforcement. At an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting earlier this year, Secretary of State Colin Powell called for greater regional intelligence sharing. American intelligence has since provided allies such as Singapore with vital information about Southeast Asian militants gleaned from interrogations of suspected detainees held in Afghanistan and at Guantánamo Bay.

But the Bush administration has primarily focused on a military-oriented solution to terrorism and on backing crackdowns on Islamist militants. Even before September 11, some United States officials favored improving military-to-military ties with a broad range of nations as a means of supplementing traditional diplomacy. The triumph over the Taliban, due in large part to the development of close links with the Afghan guerrilla Northern Alliance, strengthened this position. Yet in the wake of the Afghanistan victory, many United States officials failed to recognize the vast difference between launching a campaign in one state with the objective of removing the weak Taliban government, and dealing with a diverse group of militants embedded in numerous Southeast Asian nations, each with its own political system and internal problems.

As early as November 2001, American officials began pushing for increased military ties to Southeast Asia. Washington encouraged the Philippines, which had severed most defense links with the United States in the early 1990s, to allow a contingent of American Special Forces to train Filipino troops in battling local insurgents. In Malaysia, Washington heaped plaudits on Prime Minister

Mahathir Mohamad, a leader the United States previously had condemned for tossing reform-minded Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim into jail and repressing other political opponents. The Pentagon also attempted to boost cooperation with longtime allies Thailand and Singapore, and even leaned on old adversary Vietnam to open negotiations for access to Vietnam's strategically vital Cam Ranh Bay port.

Regarding Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, administration officials such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a former ambassador to Jakarta, urged Congress to allow closer ties with the Indonesian armed forces, known as the TNI. For four decades the most powerful institution in Indonesia, the TNI has a horrific history. Even the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, has said that "every one of Indonesia's current security crises is a manifestation of policies implemented . . . by the military." Indeed, the TNI frequently has dealt savagely with autonomy movements in outlying provinces, making unstable situations much worse. After

TNI forces went on a rampage in East Timor in 1999, murdering at least 1,000 Timorese, Congress, in a piece of legislation named the Leahy Amendment, barred military-to-military links and insisted the TNI purge its worst abusers before lifting this ban.

But the Leahy Amendment is porous. In early 2002 the Bush administration used a loophole in an appropriations bill to resume limited military aid to train TNI soldiers in counterterrorism tactics. The Bali bombing has only heightened the pressure on Congress to allow more aid, including arms, to flow to the TNI. Washington plans to spend \$50 million over three years to assist Indonesia in its antiterrorism struggle.

American officials have expressed various rationales for backing Southeast Asia's armed forces and abetting some of its leaders' more autocratic tendencies. Top officials have said that by using military force against domestic insurgents, Southeast Asian armies can reduce the pool of potential Al Qaeda recruits and narrow the space for Al Qaeda-linked groups to operate. Some have argued that, in the case of Indonesia, only the TNI possesses the range of contacts necessary to uncover militants in a vast nation containing over 17,000 islands. Others have contended that military ties to top leaders allow Washington to push Southeast

Asia's soldiers and rulers toward greater professionalism and accountability. Still others have emphasized that the police in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines are so ill equipped that Washington has no choice but to work with the armed forces before terrorists gain too many footholds in the region.

Southeast Asian leaders have responded relatively warmly to this American pressure. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a pro-United States politician who attended Georgetown University, has accepted more than \$90 million in American military aid. By spring 2002, 660 United States Special Forces soldiers had arrived in the southern Philippines, where they are training Filipino troops in counterinsurgency warfare and the use of surveillance technology. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra initially balked at strengthening ties but ultimately agreed to more port calls. And despite Megawati's reluctance to confront Islamists, TNI

leaders welcomed America's advances.

Washington's militarized strategy has delivered several victories. The TNI has revived its

elite counterterrorism unit and has begun to look more closely at links between Jemaah Islamiya and Al Qaeda. With American help, Filipino forces have reduced the Abu Sayyaf from a force of 800 two years ago to a group totaling no more than 100 today. By fall 2002, Filipino commanders called the Abu Sayyaf a "spent force." But even with Abu Sayyaf leader Abu Sabaya dead, a series of October bombings in Manila and the south suggested that Abu elements remain at large and dangerous. Some American scholars have suggested that the victories against the Abu Sayyaf demonstrate that Washington could succeed with its strategy of creating a cordon sanitaire in Southeast Asia, of using military might to destroy domestic insurgents who might be fertile ground for Al Qaeda and thereby reducing the threat of terrorism.

... WITH CORRUPT MILITARIES?

Those advocating a military solution are wrong. Even the limited victories gained in the Philippines mask serious problems with America's Southeast Asia strategy. Many Southeast Asian military and civilian leaders have used American aid in ways that actually will weaken the campaign against terrorism. According to Indonesian scholars, the TNI has supported resuming ties primarily because this would

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reduce pressure on the armed forces to unearth its past abuses. Filipino military leaders may have a similar rationale. If the Philippine armed forces can wipe out the Abu Sayyaf, it might be spared an inquiry into the army's corruption and brutality toward civilian populations in the south.

American assistance has not forced Southeast Asian militaries or autocratic leaders to become more accountable, professional, or tolerant of civil liberties. If anything, it has only emboldened them and reinforced their worst tendencies. Singapore has held the men detained in December 2001 for months without a hearing. No longer worried about American criticism, Mahathir has used Malaysia's archaic Internal Security Act, a vestige of the colonial era, to confine members of the opposition Party Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which has challenged Mahathir's rule but condemned violence. In several cases Mahathir's government charged that the detainees belonged to a violent group called the Malaysian Mujahideen Organization but later said the detainees actually were members of a different group, the Malaysian Militant Organization. Meanwhile, Bangkok officials have blamed Islamic militants for an outbreak of violence in southern Thailand that is probably linked to intrapolice squabbling; the Thai army has stepped up its surveillance of southern Muslims. In the Philippines, the armed forces' wish has come to pass. The limited success against the Abu Sayyaf has shifted public attention away from inquiries into military corruption and allowed the army to increase its campaign against other Islamist groups in the south, some of which no longer advocate violence.

Indonesia has been the worst case. Although the TNI has made some efforts to improve its human rights record, it still operates with little civilian oversight, and many TNI leaders now believe the United States condones their past behavior. TNI General A. M. Hendropriyono, who obtained the nickname "The Butcher of Lampung" for his role in a 1989 massacre of Muslim villagers in the province of Lampung, was promoted to national intelligence chief. According to human rights monitors, the TNI continues to torture and murder civilians in the separatist-minded province of Aceh, where more than 1,600 people were killed in 2002, and to target foreigners in an effort to force multinationals to hire army officers to provide private "security."

The TNI and the Philippine armed forces have neither changed their tactics nor cut ties to Islamist groups. Elements of the TNI created several of Indonesia's militant Islamist groups, arming and training Laskar Jihad, the Islamic Defenders Front,

and other Islamist militias in an attempt to foment conflicts that would require intervention by the armed forces. In 2000 the military allowed thousands of armed Laskar Jihad members to infiltrate the Moluccas, a region of Indonesia wracked by Christian-Muslim conflict. Laskar Jihad went on the warpath, massacring hundreds of civilians.

Although TNI leaders have vowed to combat terror, elements of the armed forces have retained these connections, and leading Indonesian politicians are even questioning whether soldiers were involved in the Bali bombing. In the Philippines, human rights groups have charged that corrupt soldiers continue to profit by keeping Abu Sayyaf elements alive. Some evidence supports these claims. In one incident, the army surrounded Abu Sayyaf leaders in the southern town of Lamitan, only to let the terrorists escape. Journalists in Lamitan heard the army warning the Abu Sayyaf by radio that they were planning to attack, and saw the military wait until Abu members had evacuated a building before "capturing" it.

BREEDING INSTABILITY

The behavior of United States-backed Southeast Asian militaries and autocrats could have a disastrous effect on the war on terror and on regional stability. Because they have proved unwilling to sever their links with Islamist militants, the TNI, the Philippine armed forces, and the Thai army make unreliable partners. Providing more aid to these militaries may increase the number of weapons available in the region, which could fall into the hands of militant groups. In this scenario, American weapons might one day be used by terrorists against the United States—which is what happened in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where American weapons sent to mujahideen in the 1980s contributed to a culture of anarchy. After the Taliban came to power, the Talibs inherited United States weapons from mujahideen they had captured or killed.

Since American-made weapons are easily identifiable, actions taken by corrupt soldiers or Islamists using these arms could reflect on the United States. Arab antipathy toward the United States derives in part from watching the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on the satellite television station Al Jazeera as they use American-made weapons and equipment in the Palestinian uprising. Whether or not one agrees with IDF tactics, Al Jazeera viewers notice the use of United States arms and tie IDF behavior to America. Because the TNI and other Southeast Asian armies have much worse human rights records than the IDF, one could imagine United States arms being linked to horrific

practices. This linkage would help create a generation of Southeast Asians who resent American might.

Proponents of military links correctly argue that Southeast Asia needs to banish its image of instability to lure investment, but boosting ties to militaries could actually inhibit regional development. In Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, the armed forces control massive business networks. The TNI obtains only 20 percent of its annual funding from the government, raising the rest of its capital through private enterprise. Each branch of the Indonesian military runs at least 50 major businesses and uses political and military power to prevent entrepreneurs from challenging their interests, often stifling competition through illegal means. (Army Chief of Staff Tyasno Sudarto was accused in 2000 of running the largest counterfeiting operation in Indonesian history.) As a Heritage Foundation paper notes, TNI “involvement in the economy distorts economic incentives and impedes progress.”

American aid, which, once disbursed, is extremely difficult to monitor, would help these soldiers solidify their position at the top of the economic ladder. Although not all terrorists come from impoverished backgrounds, social chaos and poverty can push desperate youths toward radical ideologies. Indeed, economic grievances already have helped Southeast Asian insurgent groups gain adherents: across the Indonesian archipelago, the more than 750,000 impoverished internally displaced refugees increasingly are siding with violent Islamists. “There are lots of refugee camps in Indonesia, filled with angry young internally displaced men,” said Bambang Harymurti, editor in chief of *Tempo*, a respected Indonesian magazine. “These camps could be breeding grounds for more terrorism.”

Perhaps most important, backing militaries and autocrats in Southeast Asia contributes to weakening the rule of law, providing terrorists with more room to operate, and allowing governments to ignore the root causes of radicalism. Funneling money to militaries reduces the capital available for Southeast Asia’s weak civilian police forces, for educational reform programs designed to reduce the appeal of radical *madrassahs* (religious schools), for good governance, or for human rights programs. Aiding armies containing elements responsible for security problems only contributes to future instability and sends the message that Washington is willing to weaken democratic institutions. Consequently, increased instability and weaker state institutions would make it easier for radicals to avoid immigration controls, obtain weapons, or raise and move money.

At the same time, backing leaders like Mahathir and organizations like the TNI demonstrates to the region that Washington cannot, in the words of Dana Dillon, a former United States army officer in Southeast Asia, “separate the fans in the stands from the players on the field.” The United States needs to distinguish among peaceful Islamic parties that want a role in a democratic system, homegrown insurgents with local grievances, and terrorist groups with links to international networks like Al Qaeda. With American support, Mahathir arrests opposition parties like PAS, while Megawati draws up her own version of Malaysia’s ISA. Meanwhile, the Philippine military lumps together the Abu Sayyaf with Islamic groups like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that are viewed as legitimate voices of dissent by many Filipino Muslims and that have abandoned violent tactics. Since the Special Forces training began, the Philippine army’s increasingly aggressive operations in the south have angered many members of the MNLF, which is demobilizing as part of a 1996 peace agreement signed with Manila. Some MNLF members have threatened to take up arms again.

An inability to differentiate between violent and nonviolent groups, between Muslim democrats and radical Islamists, could alienate the very moderates Washington needs to cultivate. After all, it was former Indonesian dictator Suharto’s repression of all Islamic parties that pushed some Indonesian Muslim leaders to become more radical and turn to violence. Similarly, abuses committed today by the TNI could push more moderate Muslims into the fundamentalists’ camp.

LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES

Simply providing guns and training for Southeast Asian armies would repeat mistakes made in South Asia during the 1980s, when Washington funneled aid to Islamist militias in Afghanistan but did not minimize popular sympathy for extremists, address the roots of militancy in Pakistan, or question the behavior of its proxies, the Pakistani military and the mujahideen. In Southeast Asia, Washington must simultaneously pursue several goals. Most important, the United States needs to adopt a law enforcement-oriented approach that focuses on police work and forces Southeast Asian authorities to distinguish between the “players” and the “fans.” The United States could provide more aid for Southeast Asia’s civilian police and could facilitate greater sharing of intelligence and counterterrorism expertise through the ASEAN Regional Forum or by calling a regional summit on terrorism. Currently,

when faced with a terrorist threat, each Southeast Asian nation immediately looks to the United States for help, even though neighbors like Singapore may be knowledgeable about battling terrorists.

Just as important, the United States could help address the complex indigenous causes of extremist Islamist sentiment. American officials could push Southeast Asia's leaders not to broaden the definition of terrorist so that it can be used to justify repressing political opponents. Instead, Southeast Asian leaders should use democratic institutions and methods to go on the political attack against radical Islamists. For example, Indonesian President Megawati could draw on revulsion at the Bali bombing to rally moderates around her, campaign aggressively against radical Islamists in future elections, and curtail her ministers' ties to militants spewing anti-Western and anti-Semitic vitriol. After all, the majority of Indonesians still practice a liberal version of Islam: Indonesia recently voted down a constitutional amendment that would have forced Muslims to obey *sharia* (Islamic law). And Southeast Asian leaders who gained greater popular support through democratic means would be in a better position to extend civilian control over the armed forces, reducing the military's economic and political influence.

If Megawati and other Southeast Asian leaders prove willing to accept this political battle, Washington could provide several forms of support. The United States might help cultivate moderate Muslim voices within civil society to reduce the influence of radical madrassahs, which have produced many of the members of Jemaah Islamiya and other groups. (The madrassah in Solo, Indonesia that trained many Jemaah Islamiya members is still operational and currently enrolls more than 2,000 students.) Washington could provide funding for nongovernmental organizations focusing on conflict reduction in the southern Philippines, the Moluccas, and other areas where radical Islamists are strong. The United States also could support the creation of an Indonesian human rights court and push for a more thorough examination of past abuses by the armed forces.

Simultaneously, Washington could adopt several strategies to allay Southeast Asian fears of American might. The United States should set a timetable and exit strategy for any assistance it provides to Southeast Asian intelligence, civilian police, or militaries. Washington also could emphasize that it has

no desire to maintain permanent military bases in the region.

Economic development also will prove crucial to reducing radicalism. The United States, the largest source of new foreign investment in Indonesia, could push the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and other lenders to extend the length of their loans to Jakarta and provide new assistance. The international organizations could also target aid for projects overseen by international NGOs, could avoid providing aid to military-linked businesses, and could specifically target small companies. Some Indonesian ministers recognize they need more help and have asked the World Bank for special fast-disbursing loans designed to help the "educated unemployed"—the hundreds of thousands of young Indonesians leaving college who are unable to find jobs. Washington also could help the Philippines reschedule its crippling burden of foreign debt and could provide guarantees for Philippine, Thai, Indonesian, and Malaysian agricultural exports.

STEMMING THE TIDE

As the Bali bombing demonstrates, terrorist groups, including some with links to Al Qaeda, are becoming more aggressive in Southeast Asia. All indications suggest that terror networks are likely to pose an even greater threat to the region's development and stability, and that radical Islam is attracting growing numbers of adherents. Yet it should be remembered, although Southeast Asian Muslims traditionally followed a syncretic version of the faith, and although the region is home to a diverse range of ethnicities and religions, Afghanistan in the 1970s also was known for its liberal Islam and ethnoreligious diversity.

As currently constituted, America's new Southeast Asia strategy will not stem this rising tide of Islamism and terror. Backing military forces that are themselves responsible for societal breakdown will only weaken the rule of law, allowing Islamists more room to slip in and out of porous borders, train recruits, and launch attacks. Aiding armies will do nothing to boost economic development in the region, which still has not recovered from the financial crisis that swept the region in the late 1990s. Only by attacking the root causes of terror and by pushing Southeast Asia's leaders to use democratic methods to confront radicals in the political arena can the United States and the region's governments avoid a replay of Afghanistan's descent into chaos. ■