

## Drawing ASEAN Limits and Strengths in Tackling Terrorism: Study Case of Abu Sayyaf Group\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Terrorism issue had been a concern of ASEAN since the war on terror related to the tragedy of 9/11. ASEAN has its own problem regarding terrorism, one of them is Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) which based in the Philippines. The actions of this group are not only harm the stability of the Philippines nationally, but also Southeast Asia as a whole. They do not hesitate to use violence in pursuing their interests. They also functioned the loose controlled state border as their base of command. They recruits people to be part of them and aims to build caliphate in Southeast Asia. This paper analyses how ASEAN view this ASG as regional threat by using Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), also draws the limits and strengths of ASEAN when facing ASG particularly and terrorism generally.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Terrorism, Abu Sayyaf Group, RSCT, Limits and Strengths

*Isu-isu mengenai terorisme sudah menjadi perhatian bagi ASEAN, terutama sejak era war on terror yang berkaitan langsung dengan tragedi 11 September. ASEAN sendiri juga berhadapan dengan masalah terorisme di kawasanya, salah satunya adalah Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) yang berbasis di Filipina. Aktivitas dari grup tersebut tidak hanya memberikan ancaman bagi kestabilan keamanan dari Filipina, namun juga pada Asia Tenggara secara keseluruhan. Kelompok tersebut tidak segan untuk menggunakan kekerasan di dalam mencapai tujuannya. Selain itu, mereka memanfaatkan control negara yang longgar sebagai basis dari tindakan-tindakannya. Mereka juga merekrut orang untuk menjadi bagian dari mereka, dengan tujuan untuk membangun system kekhilifahan di kawasan Asia Tenggara. Tulisan ini membahas bagaimana ASEAN melihat ASG sebagai ancaman regional dengan menggunakan Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), juga melihat sejauh mana ASEAN mampu menghadapi ASG secara khusus atau terorisme secara keseluruhan.*

**Kata-Kata Kunci:** ASEAN, Terorisme, Abu Sayyaf Group, RSCT, Batasan dan Kekuatan

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\*Tulisan ini merupakan pemenang dari "Call for Essay: ASEAN Community Post 2015" yang diadakan oleh ASEAN Studies Center UGM

ASEAN is now deemed able to withstand the multiple threats to one of its members as well as to the regional organization as a whole. The threats are ranging from the shape of ideology, such as the first ASEAN viewed communism as threat of Southeast Asia, to the irregular issues. The tragedy that occurred on 11 September, when nearly 6000 people died and a loss of nearly 10 billion US dollars to be borne by the United States (US) because of terrorist attack that hijacked civilian aircrafts and drove them to the WTC (Morgan 2009). The attack prompted the US, as the victims, declared war on terrorism. ASEAN actually had discussed terrorism issue before 9/11 happened, since the summit in 1997 and continued until the signing of the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism in Cebu Philippines on January 13, 2007 (Soesilowati 2011). In response to terrorism which issued by the United States, ASEAN declared its willingness to be the US partner to participate in tackling the problem of global terrorism (Soesilowati 2011).

On average in Southeast Asia, the terrorism issues come from the separatist movement or motion-based Islam. One of the terrorist movement, which is enough to unnerve the member countries of ASEAN, is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) which based in the Philippines. ASG was an extremist organization formed by Amilhussin Jumaani and Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani in 1991. They have the principle for attacking other religious groups and believe that violence is the only way in the fight against others (Tan 2001). ASG has close connection with the world terrorist groups, and particularly Janjalani is well-known as Afghanistan war veterans. ASG famously run to the kidnapping of terrorist acts, which succeeded in recruiting many new soldiers. This movement then successfully carry out terror bomb detonated in a few places in Manila and also in the Philippine embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia (Tan 2001). Recently, the ASG captivity was proven to hijacking action to the vessels crew from Indonesia and Malaysia. As quoted by the BBC (2016) ASG will not release the hostages if no ransom crate desired. Indonesia's Chief Security Minister, Luhut Pandjaitan, said conditions were carried out by ASG is an act of "New Somalia".

The latest addition to the issues related to captivity vessel crew from Malaysia and Indonesia, ASG was already well known from the past as a source of some of the clutter does. The chaos can be seen from the number of bombings, kidnappings, assassinations,

and extortion activities alleged to them either by the Government of the Philippines, ASEAN and the international community (Banlaoi 2006). This is a challenge for ASEAN, especially what had been done by the ASG is no longer bound by the state but transnational crime. The Philippines government as the base country of the ASG, proved not able to provide the right solution for handling them in the Southeast Asian region.

### **Regional Security Complex Theory: How ASEAN See the Terrorism as Threat**

There are several theories describing how a regional look at the concept of security in the region, Regional Security Complex is one of them. This theory is presented by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003) that revealed the concept of security will be shaped by the dynamics which occurred in a certain region. It will become the basis for us to see how ASEAN to form a concept of security in the region and the response of ASG. There are at least two main concepts that establish Regional Security Theory Complex (RSCT), first is power relations and second is pattern of amity and enmity.

Power relations are concepts that are formed when the dynamics of a particular area then influenced by forces that are owned by its members (Buzan & Waever 2003). This conception will show how a country responds to the actions of other countries in their region, which is based on the relationship of forces between them. Furthermore, power relations see that the forces that exist within a region will be interconnected and mutually influence one another. The second concept is the pattern of amity and enmity. This concept illustrates the pattern of relations between countries will establish, by construction, the dynamics in the region. Effect of amity and enmity patterns is quite large considering the dynamics of the region will be shaped by historical factors and norms that held by its members, so that the pattern of relations between countries is happening earlier plays a fairly important.

In the past, RSCT in Southeast Asia tend constituted by aspects of the past when countries in Southeast Asia mostly struggling to get their independence from invaders. This causes the tendency of ASEAN countries to be aware of the threat to them. Such threats both from within and outside the region. ASEAN, from the beginning

was to form an organization that tried to free the members from threats both from within and outside the country, traditional and non-traditional. In the case of terrorism, as the Philippines could no longer tackle the actions of ASG, this country emphasized terrorism issue as emergency condition that should be responded immediately. Therefore, there was effort from other ASEAN member countries to establish a framework in order to provision the common understanding in combating terrorism. This effort was fueled by the experiences of some ASEAN members about terrorism in their territories, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar. Moreover, ASG was not only about terrorism but also connected with the human rights violence transnationally. Thus, this group gives impact to the region instability.

The second concept of amity and enmity pattern in ASEAN can be true of the history of ASEAN, while initially each country suspicious with each other. But as time goes by, each of the ASEAN countries began to establish a pattern of cooperation as set out in the ASEAN Charter and is used as a basic to run dynamics of the region until now. Amity and enmity pattern has become one of the measures, how do we get to see the interaction between members of a community security in the region. ASEAN, as it is known along with a history of good relations, viewed the initiative of the Secretaries of State to establish a regional organization, so that a pattern of cooperation is already there from the beginning. But do not rule out also, that before ASEAN was formed and while it is running, the mini-conflict between countries with one another. Indonesia and Malaysia almost open conflict before ASEAB formed, as well as Malaysia and the Philippines for Sabah territory. Both of these patterns influence on the dynamics of interaction between members which themselves are on the construction of the dynamics of these interactions in order to find the right pattern in future interactions. The dynamics of the interactions that occur before it could encourage interaction patterns in the future, is then relations between countries in the region could be closer, or just the opposite.

Through the conception of this RSCT, we have observed that the ASEAN countries began to see the terrorist as a common threat, visible from ACCT formation in 2007. The dynamics that occur in ASEAN has been encouraging members to no longer see that terrorism is a threat to the security of single country, but the

Southeast Asia region as a whole. In addition, the constellation internationally outside the Southeast Asian region also formed the view that the ASG is a threat to both members of ASEAN and the international community because the target they were after not only the local population but also involve foreign residents, especially the American (Sailing Totem 2014). Such thing as terrorism, can never be faced by one country, in this case the Philippines, but of course involving ASEAN, because in this case terrorism is the transnational threat in Southeast Asia. As much as the Philippines strives to confront ASG, if there is no cooperation as well as agreements between countries in ASEAN, would be impossible to be resolved because ASG could take advantage of loose of border lines as a way to escape or even expand their network.

### **ASEAN Limits in Combating Terrorism**

It is a common understanding that terrorism in Southeast Asia had been existing since a long time ago even before the 9/11 tragedy. This rebellion got engine by not only religion spirit, but also the cultural clash between specific society within a state and the central government. It is getting worse when the global war on terrorism became major issue in 2001, as the groups did not hesitate to show their movements to challenge the ruling regime. Moreover, they are now connected each other in a global network which has strong chain and basis. These considerations encouraged all ASEAN members to condemn terrorism unequivocally.

However, Even though ASEAN had projected that terrorism generally and ASG particularly as definite threats which would harm the stability in the region, ASEAN seems loose in engaging its member countries to strengthen the cooperation. It is clearly seen that ASEAN has two hindrances that limits what it can do. We argue that the limitations lie both in the elite side and the civil society side. First, many people consider that ASEAN is good in creating framework, but weak in implementing the common policies. Regarding the issue of terrorism, ASEAN works not only among its member states, but also with dialogue partners. Starting from 2001, just few months after the 9/11 attack, member countries stipulated its condemnation about terrorism on "ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism", which also set nine practical measure to fight terrorism, such as: discuss and explore practical ideas and initiatives to increase

ASEAN's role in and involvement with the international community including extra-regional partners within existing frameworks such as the ASEAN + 3, the ASEAN Dialogue Partners and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to make the fight against terrorism a truly regional and global endeavor; and strengthen cooperation at bilateral, regional and international levels in combating terrorism in a comprehensive manner and affirm that at the international level the United Nations should play a major role in this regard (asean.org 2016). In 2002, the ministries of ASEAN countries held Special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Terrorism and signed the ASEAN Declaration on Terrorism. Five years later, ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism established. In 2004, the foreign ministers stated "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on 'the Rise of Violence and Brutality Committed by Terrorist/Extremist Organizations in Iraq and Syria". In 2015, there was special ministerial meeting to respond the rise of radicalization and violent extremism. Recently in 2016, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' announced the statement regarding terrorist attack in Jakarta (asean.org 2016).

From this timeline, ASEAN is still having problem in conducting common policy. They took long time to ratification the convention and apply the real action, while the terrorist could have planned the following insurgences. Therefore, the talks about terrorism in regional level remains having no particular conclusion. The current attack in Jakarta should be a whip for ASEAN to consider that agreement and framework are not enough to fight against terrorism which has been deployed in the society.

The absence of commonality within ASEAN member countries is caused by at least two reasons. First, whilst the terrorist groups are now linked one another, the ASEAN governments tried to respond them independently. There is lack of regional mindset when it comes to addressing terrorism since each member states use different approaches (Almuttaqi 2016). In this case, The Philippines jumped onto the American bandwagon and took full advantages from using American military arm to handle domestic security problem (Hafidz 2009). This behavior was the effect of ASEAN perfunctory to the Philippines terrorism urgency. Each ASEAN member states regard differently about this. For instance, Brunei Darussalam which never experienced the insurgency of militant Islam, has no strong intention to fully involve in combating terrorism.

The second reason is that ASEAN member countries tend to be reluctant to spend more expenditure to fight terrorism in one particular countries due to the stagnation of economic growth. Simply said, the instable situation regarding the security impacted to the decline of income from tourism and foreign investment in this region. According the survey results from the A.T. Kearney Foreign Direct Investment Confidence Index in 2004, 2005, and 2007, leading executives of international companies responded that terrorism is one of their major concerns while making overseas investment decisions. If Southeast Asia is considered as a region plagued with frequent terrorist activities, foreign companies will avoid doing business here (Chia-yi 2016). It caused ASEAN hardly initiate the law enforcement and establish related instruments to fight terrorism.

Another hindrance is on the civil society side. We argue, first, the Islam majority, but they feel like minority, in Southeast Asian people become the main concern to terrorism deployment. Radical to extremist Islamic militant spread the issue that the need to uphold the Islamic norms to fight the injustice treatments by the state government. Paying attention to the case of ASG, it is obvious that they demand of the recognition of their existence and aims to build a distant caliphate as it pledged allegiance to the ISIS (Almuttaqi 2016). Second, they usually recruit people from the low economic and education level and organize the training inside the unreachable zone near the states border which is out of government control. These target citizens have no enough information about the propaganda of terrorist. Therefore, they are easily provoked to the promises of the radical and extremist Islamic groups.

### **Strengthening ASEAN Power to Fight Terrorism**

Addressing those two backgrounds of limitations, we also suggest two approaches in order to strengthen the ASEAN power in combating terrorism. On one side is, what the elite should do in creating applicable strategies regionally. On the other side is, how to empower the society and raise the awareness to the terrorist propaganda. At the government level, ASEAN framework in combating terrorism is an enough base to set up real actions. Moreover, the cooperation among some countries has been establish such as sharing intelligence from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore in 2002 (David 2002). The following should be commitment to push the law enforcement to

avoid the reluctant behavior of member countries, and establishing concrete instruments as well. This method might need a vocal actor which still underpin the non-intervention principal and respecting states' sovereignty but ask for more cooperation.

In this term, the urgency of reinterpreting ASEAN common understanding does matter. Consideration that ASEAN member states' sovereignty has not been obsolete and ensuring the stabilization through common region securitization in order to secure the foreign investment are highly needed. Thus, ASEAN could conduct specific tactics to fight terrorism, such as arresting the terrorist suspects by having common military action. Yet, transparency in judicial process should be underpin so that anti-terror laws are not used for political purposes but specifically as security tools.

Later, radical to extremist Islamic militants are targeting the mind of the people, therefore civil society should also play active role to educate each other. What should be strengthen is the national and regional awareness together with the concept of human rights pillar. As Southeast Asia consist of heterogenic ethnics and cultures, it is important to put force in respecting human beings, without differencing them from their nations and races. Besides, ASEAN needs to develop local, data-driven restorative approaches to prevent and rehabilitate radicalization (Greer and Watson 2016). Noting the example of Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) which offers a range of social engagement on extremism. Moreover, leaders can't forget about closing geopolitical gaps by providing basic social services to population in poorly-governed regions since the lack administrative control caused this area became a hotbed for rogue groups (Greer and Watson 2016 in Chandran 2016). In short, ASEAN needs militarily force also increase economic development, social stability, and political participation also need to work for more structural change (Swanstrom dan Bjornehed 2004).

## Conclusion

According to the Regional Security Complex Theory, the way ASEAN regards terrorism is generated by two reasons. First is the existence of power relations among the member countries which emphasize that ASG threatens the whole region. The Philippines experiences of ASG



triggered common condemnation to the terrorism, as terrorist threats also occurred in some other ASEAN member countries. Second, the member states used to feel suspicious each other but this issue united them to work together because terrorism is not a problem of single country but problem of ASEAN. Even though this consideration had been shaped, there are some limits of ASEAN in tackling ASG. First, lack of real implementation when the frameworks had been established. Second is the condition of heterogeneity of Southeast Asia people. Thus, to empower the strengths of ASEAN, member countries should concern on reinterpreting the commonality and commitment in combatting terrorism also strengthening the social engagement and education of the civil society.

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