REGIONAL SECURITIZATION OF THE ISIS[*] IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTER-TERRORISM STRATEGIES FOR THE POST-ISIS ERA

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In 2017, the United States of America declared the defeat of the ISIS's core territory. Since then, many analysts have argued that the group would threaten the security of several Southeast Asia regions. However, other analysts argued that the threat to the Southeast Asian (SEA) regions should not be exaggerated since it is not serious or critical. This raised the question of alternative regions for its thought and activists. This article critically analyzes the ISIS terrorist threats to SEA regional security in the post-ISIS era. It identifies the key challenges facing the SEA regional counter-terrorism strategies amid the new developments. A qualitative research approach has been adopted with thematic analysis methods in this article. Moreover, the Copenhagen schools' securitization and regional security complex theories have been used as a theoretical framework. Results show that to increase the states and community capacity to deal with this top non-traditional security threat, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its member states continually adopt various initiatives, programs, policies, and strategies.

Keywords: *the post-ISIS era, terrorism and counterterrorism, regional security complex, securitization, ASEAN, non-traditional security.*

Introduction

After the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in its core territory, declared by the USA and Iraq in July 2017, the defense ministers of ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) met in October that year. The meeting agenda was to forge a response to possible new ISIS threats because some of its fighters returned to Asia (Periani and Mangku 2018). In early February 2018, the defense ministers identified terrorism as the main threat to their region. This included several other regional security challenges, such as the South China Sea and North Ko-

rea. The ministers termed terrorism a severe threat to the ASEAN's progress, prosperity, and life (Tan 2018). Though Southeast Asia has fought terrorism for a long time, the recent global terrorism developments have increased the need to monitor and track terrorist threats in the region (Ilyas 2022). Since 2017, some analysts have argued that the ISIS would threaten the security of Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Singapore. However, other analysts argue that the ISIS threat towards Southeast Asian security is not yet serious or critical and should not be exaggerated. On March 22, 2019, Trump revealed a map confirming 100-percent defeat and the end of ISIS. Consequently, more analysis is needed to broaden and deepen the understanding and management of Southeast Asia's terrorism dilemma. The developments in the terrorism trends, as well as counter-terrorism strategies and policies at regional, national, and international levels, have attracted much interest from media, policymakers, and academia. To date, except for Media and policy reports, only a few academic literatures analyze the ISIS-Southeast Asia correlations. Most media that monitored the relationship between ISIS and the Southeast Asian region indicated that the defeat does not end terrorist threats. Also, apart from Afghanistan, Libya, and other Asian and sub-Sahara African countries, the Southeast Asian region is the expected alternative destination for fighters. Therefore, this article examines whether the defeat of ISIS in its core territory raise new terrorist threats to Southeast Asian Security. Furthermore, it focuses on the emerging key challenges for ISIS securitization in the SEA counter-terrorism strategies concerning these new developments. These two aspects provide a critical analysis and discussion on the Southeast Asian regional security in the era of terrorist threats from ISIS's defeat. Also, they deepen the understanding of how this defeat leads to significant challenges for SEA counter-terrorism strategies.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This article is designed based on a qualitative research strategy. Data were collected from different sources, including conference research papers, journal articles, newspaper reports, books, and official governments' reports and documents. Thematic analysis method was used to analyze data.

This article has adopted the Copenhagen schools' securitization and the relevant regional security complex theories as a theoretical framework, well explained by Neal Imperial. It is a combination of the regional security complex theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2009; see also Stritzel 2014). Buzan and Waever, representing the Copenhagen School, have adopted a comprehensive security notion, incorporating political, economic, societal, environmental, and military security categories. Securitization is a two-stage process that helps distinguish between what is and what is not a security threat. First, an actor presents an issue or an entity as an existential threat to a referent object and is accepted by the audience. Second, the audience must accept the actor's interpretation of events and recognize that extraordinary measures must be implemented. Hence, an issue is successfully securitized when the actor convinces the audience that a referent object is existentially threatened and that extraordinary measures must be taken against the threat (Buzan and Waever 2009; Stritzel 2014; Imperial 2005).

An Overview of the ISIS Threat to the Southeast Asian Region

Terrorism is not a new threat to the Southeast Asian region. Some analysts consider ISIS networking with other terrorist groups and movements in the region as a new development of the threat. Southeast Asia has been experiencing terrorist incidents for nearly two decades, including the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, the 2003 and 2009 J. W. Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta, the 2004 bombing of Super Ferry 14 in the southern Philippines, and the Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta, as well as the 2009 Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Jakarta (Surwandono, Retnoningsih, and Alkatiri 2018; Yumitro *et al.* 2020). ISIS has represented a new type of terrorism with several characteristics. First, terrorism is a multi-national coalition of groups that pledged loyalty to the caliph and the caliphate. Second, it is the possession of a multi-national military capability. Third, terrorism is the control of large swathes of land. Fourth, it is the existence of a government. Lastly, the terrorism is the ability to regularly attack and defeat the local and international enemy. Also, there are indications that new ISIS operation bases are likely to emerge, probably in some parts of the Asia-Pacific (Singh 2017). This prospect has gained more support after the ISIS's defeat in its core territory (Iraq and Syria) in 2017. It has witnessed terrorism and attacks inspired by the Islamic State group in Malaysia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. According to Navy Adm. Harry Harris, chief of the U.S. Pacific Command, they succeeded in degrading ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Libya, but the radicalized, weaponized, and displaced terrorists seek new footholds in the Indo-Asia-Pacific (Shinkman 2017). There is inadequate official statistical data on Southeast Asian militants in ISIS. However, in 2015, Lim Yan Liang and Danson Cheong reported in *The Street Times* that more than 700 fighters from Indonesia and 200 from Malaysia have traveled to the Middle East to participate in the violence and fight for ISIS in the Middle East (Liang 2015). In 2017, the Western media reports estimated that over 1000 Southeast Asian fighters joined this terrorist group in Iraq and Syria (Cheong 2017). Other statistics in a brief report published in 2018 by *The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness* show that since 2016, Turkey deported over 400 Indonesian fighters attempting to join ISIS in Syria. Between 2017 and 2018, Security forces in Malaysia arrested 45 foreign fighters, including three commanders from Iraq (Murphy, Oliver, and Maples 2018). Since its establishment in 2014, ISIS has leveraged a Philippine-based facilitator to handle logistics for its group in Southeast Asia. This includes the movement of fighters and money from Syria to Indonesia to support attacks. Moreover, it has sent more than $1.5 million to fund operations in the Philippines (*Ibid.*). The Southeast Asian dimension of ISIS was formally expressed with the formation of Katibah Nusantara in 2016. This is a Southeast Asian wing formed by Malay and Indonesian speaking fighters in Syria (Henkin, Boyd, and Martin 2020). The same year witnessed many ISIS incidents and activities regarding Southeast Asian region, especially in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The announcement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on June 28, 2014 was followed by a comprehensive and effective propaganda campaign, conveying the impression of ISIS's invincibility and validation from God (Schulze and Liow 2019). Among the media threats to Southeast Asia one may recall a seven-minute English-language video released by the official ISIS media. It contained messages from several fighters in the Southern Philippines and scenes from battles with government troops near Marawi City. One of the fighters urges Muslims in East Asia, specifically those in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei,

Thailand, and Singapore, to migrate and fight alongside the Philippines' ISIS-linked militants. A militant identified as Abul-Yamaan from Marawi, calls on Muslims to come forth to the land of jihad and perform *hijrah* in Marawi (Windrem 2017). The video featured a Singaporean foreign fighter in Syria, calling on people to join the ranks of the Mujahidin in East Asia and inflict black days upon the crusaders. Also, they urged to head to Sham [Syria], Khurasan, Yemen, West Africa, and Libya (Postings 2018). Previously, in August 2015, the ISIS online magazine, *Dabiq*, called for the targeting of embassies in countries that form a global coalition against the group. This coalition includes Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Liang 2015). In response to targeting and killing the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, ISIS and pro-ISIS media platforms produced propaganda in English, Arabic, and local languages, calling for the support of the Rohingya Muslims (Cheong 2017).

Abu Sayyaf, based in Isnilon Hapilon, the southern Philippine region of Mindanao, was named the Islamic State group emir for Southeast Asia in 2016 (Shinkman 2017). ISIS has declared two provinces in the southern Philippines, including Wilayat Filipines, under Isnilon Hapilon, and East Asia Wilayat, under Abu Abdillah (Singh 2017). The April 9, 2016 attack on Philippine security forces on Basilan's southern island was conducted by groups claiming allegiance to ISIS. Since Islamic State has significantly lost much of its Middle Eastern territory, those wishing to fight for the group are forced to look elsewhere. Philippines appear to be a more attractive destination for the ISIS supporters (Postings 2018). This was evidenced in April 2017 when a coalition of pro-ISIS militants captured the Philippine city of Marawi. It took the Philippine military five months to liberate the city, where over 900 militants, including leaders of two of the participating terrorist groups, and 165 government personnel were killed (Murphy, Oliver, and Maples 2018). The incidences in the Philippines' Marawi City symbolize the ISIS operation in Southeast Asia (Singh, B. and Singh J. 2019). In the same year, a series of bay'at (pledge of allegiance) to ISIS were undertaken by radical groups and clerics from Indonesia and the Philippines. The audacity of the caliphate announcement and forcefulness of its communications strategy set it apart from other groups (Schulze and Liow 2019). Katibah Nusantara performs several functions, such as providing a social network to help settle the Southeast Asian recruits, training those that would eventually take up arms, and communicating with pro-ISIS groups operating in Syria. These developments show that the ISIS threat in Southeast Asia is real and has grown since mid-2014 (*Ibid.*).They include the conflict in Marawi city, the suicide and bomb attacks inspired by ISIS in Indonesia, the arrest of its supporters in Malaysia, and the Videos threatening SEA. Even when the Philippine government regains Marawi City, a functioning and operating model has been exported to the region, and experts expect more Marawi City-type operations in Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar (Singh, B. and Singh J. 2019). There have been previously unprecedented Europeans' attempts to join ISIS in the Philippines (Postings 2018), with some coming from Spain, German, UK, and Switzerland. These cases represent an unprecedented movement of Europeans trying to or successfully joining ISIS in the Philippines (*Ibid.*). In early 2016, Uighurs from China was found among Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) militants during clashes between MIT and Indonesian police in Poso (Haripin, Anindya, and Priamarizki 2020).

In Indonesia, Poso became a training ground for foreign fighters hoping to travel and join ISIS (Haripin, Anindya, and Priamarizki 2020; Jones and Salahudin 2015).

To support them, ISIS tried to transplant its model to Poso, though it was neutralized by the Indonesian military (Haripin, Anindya, and Priamarizki 2020; Jones and Salahudin 2015; Singh 2017). For instance, it inspired attacks in Jakarta on January 14, 2016, and continues to be a persistent terrorism threat to Southeast Asian societies (Schulze and Liow 2019). It has emerged as a significant manifestation of this threat because of the speed with which it has gained popularity in the region (Schulze and Liow 2019). In 2016, an Indonesian suicide bomber believed to be a supporter attacked a police station in Solo City in Central Java Province, dying in the explosion and injuring a police officer. Another bombing attack targeting a police station and shopping district in central Jakarta in broad daylight was masterminded by an Indonesian ISIS fighter based in Syria. This incident marked the militant group's first successful attack on Indonesian ground (Schulze and Liow 2019).

In March 2016, a small network of ISIS supporters tried to sneak two foreign terror suspects from Malaysia to another Southeast Asian country and channel funds to a southern Philippines group. However, they were arrested by the Malaysian police before causing real damage (Osman and Arosoaie 2020). In July 2016, the Malaysian police confirmed the first successful ISIS attack in the country, after unsuccessful numerous plots planned by ISIS-linked suspects to attack non-Islamic public targets. According to Malaysian authorities, a Syria-based Malaysian ISIS fighter had ordered the June 28 grenade attack on a bar outside Kuala Lumpur City, in which two of the local suspects were police officers (*Ibid.*).

In 2015, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong said in *The Shangri-La Dialogue* that ISIS probably established a base somewhere in the region. Lee dismissed ISIS's plan to turn Southeast Asia into a province of a worldwide Islamic caliphate. However, ISIS could gain a territorial foothold in the region, as had happened in the Middle East, and this would pose a serious threat to the whole region (Parameswaran 2015). In Malaysia and Singapore, it is the ISIS eschatological ideology and theology that has attracted a following. However, in Indonesia, the group has a religious appeal, though other reasons have also been cited to explain its attraction. These include kinship networks and loyalties, individual and group rivalries, as well as personal and pragmatic interests (Schulze and Liow 2019).

For Myanmar**,** ISIS declared through its online publication, *Dabiq*, that it plans to establish a base in Bangladesh. This is aimed at launching revenge attacks on the Myanmar government over its treatment of the Rohingya. Myanmar is another worrying area since the security officials brew crisis in Rakhine state. For instance, a crackdown by the Myanmar army left hundreds dead and sparked an exodus of over 500,000 Muslim Rohingya to Bangladesh (Kusuma *et al.* 2021). In response to Burmese security forces targeting and killing the Rohingya Muslim minority, ISIS and pro-ISIS media platforms produced propaganda in different languages calling for the support of the Rohingya Muslims (Bashar 2019). A pro-ISIS media group published an article in November 2017, stating that as Muslims, they must perform their duties in supporting their people in [Burma], with all they have, including providing them with money, weapons, mujahideen [fighters], and expertise (Murphy, Oliver, and Maples 2018).

In Thailand, the number of terrorist incidents in the Deep South (the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla) in 2019 was the lowest since the conflict reignited in 2004. Thai security officials remain concerned about the

potential for ISIS to infiltrate domestic insurgent groups, although they have maintained that there is no evidence to date of any operational linkages between these domestic groups and international terrorism networks. Thailand's principal vulnerability to international terrorism continues to be as a transit and facilitation hub, given the high volume of travelers through Bangkok's main airport and available market of illegal goods (Cogan and Mishra 2021; Yurachat and Sirivunnabood 2021).

The decline of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the advent of ISIS-linked violence in South East Asia show the possibility of a new era of transnational jihadist terrorism in the region. Recurring albeit unsubstantiated reports about ISIS activity in Thailand have prompted questions about the vulnerability of the country's Muslim-majority deep south and, in particular, its longstanding Malay-Muslim insurgency to jihadist influence. To date, there is no evidence of jihadists making inroads among the separatist fronts fighting for what they see as liberation of their homeland, Patani. But the conflict and a series of ISIS scares in Thailand are fanning fears of a new terrorist threat. Such fears are not irrational, though are largely misplaced and should not obscure the calamity of the insurgency and the need to end it. Direct talks between insurgent leaders and the government are a priority; a decentralised political system could help address the principal grievances in the south while preserving the unitary Thai state (Pherali 2021; Finnbogason and Svensson 2018).

Overall, the number of insurgent terrorist attacks and related fatalities decreased from the previous year; however, the November 5th 2019 attack at a security checkpoint in Yala killed 15, making it the single deadliest attack attributed to southern insurgents since 2004. Attacks in 2019 were primarily confined to Thailand's southernmost provinces, although a set of coordinated small-scale explosions in Bangkok in August is widely believed to be linked to the Deep South insurgency. Terrorist methods primarily included shootings, arson, IEDs, and VBIEDs (Pherali 2021).

In 2020, the Tri-Border Area comprising the Sulu/Celebes seas between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines has been in the spotlight for terrorist activities. For example, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) conducted an operation codenamed 'Maharlika III' from February to March based on intelligence information on common routes that criminals and terrorists use to travel in the area. During the operation 'Perfect Storm' in November, the Philippine special forces successfully intercepted Abu Sayyaf Group terrorists during a sea battle (Quitoriano 2021). The ASEAN member states focus their attention on the Tri-Border area given the severity of terrorist activities there. However, they should also maintain maritime domain awareness of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. This waterway is another crucial sea line of communications, especially for cargo vessels. The use of cargo vessels is one way that FTFs could adapt their travel methods. For example, in March 2020, the US Justice Department reported that Islamic State (ISIS) supporter Muhammad Masood attempted to travel to ISIS territory in Syria in part via a cargo vessel. The Straits of Malacca and Singapore have witnessed security incidents in the past. While no terrorist attacks had occurred there, there were instances of smuggling, planned and actual terrorist travel (*Ibid.*).
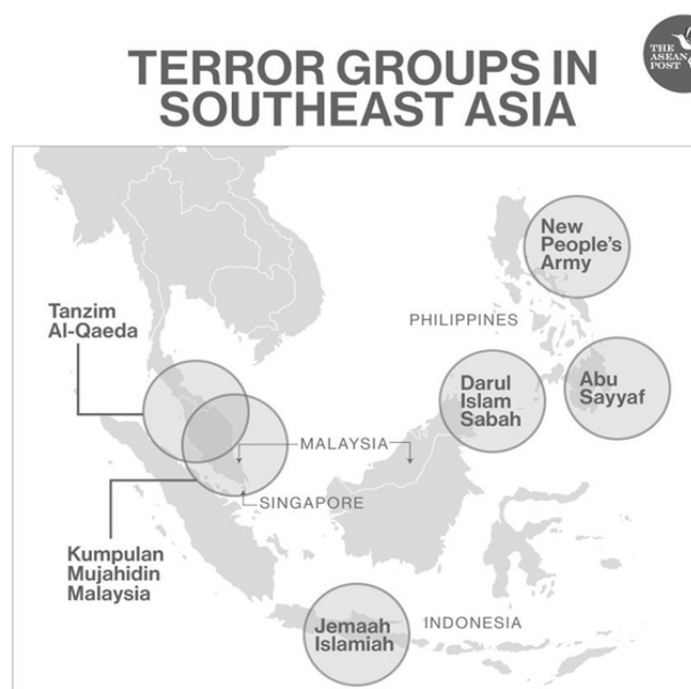
Fig. The following map concludes the main terror Groups in SEA region
Source: Rahman (2020).

The pieces of evidence above confirm that ISIS has moved to the Southeast Asian region. Also, the post-ISIS scenario should not rule out a mega-merger of Islamic State and al-Qaeda.[*] This is supported by the fact that the aging al-Qaeda leaders are quitting, and both groups have a strong footprint. Both pro-al Qaeda and pro-ISIS groups are present in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, many Southeast Asians fight for ISIS, al-Qaeda's military wing, and Jabhat al-Nusra[*] in the Middle East. The pro-al Qaeda Jemaah Islamiyah, a significant security threat in the region from 1999 to 2010, remains active to this day (Singh 2017). According to Schulze and Liow, some Southeast Asians carrying arms have already been killed in the conflict zones, especially in battles with Kurdish forces. Also, some Southeast Asians in the Middle East conflict zones are not fighting for ISIS. Instead, they are fighting with other rebel groups, as well as the Al-Nusra Front (Schulze and Liow 2019). Furthermore, the United Nations Security Council indicated in its published report in 2018 that the ISIS threat to South-East Asia persists and may be intensified by the group's losses in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. This is evidenced by the dispersion of funds and fighters from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. The region has seen a substantial increase in terrorist plots (UNSC 2018).

Securitization of the ISIS Threats in the ASEAN Counterterrorism Agenda

As shown in the overview, since 2014 the threats and incidents of ISIS have never been separated from terror activities in the Southeast Asian region. The terror activities have existed since the late 1980s. Gunaratna (2016) and Febrica (2010) analyzed the securitization of terrorism in Southeast Asia before the ISIS era. In 1988, Mohammad Jamal

Khalifa, the brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden, established the Manila branch of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). The IIRO is a respectable Saudi charity that assists Islamist groups in the region and served as a regional hub for al-Qaeda. Additionally, the 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Ahmed Yousef and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammad traveled to Southeast Asia in 1994 to plan the elaborate Bojinka operation, including the bombing of 12 US airliners over the Pacific. Similarly, within the MILF Camp Abu Bakar complex, the Kuwaiti trainer Omar Al Farooq established Camp Vietnam to train Southeast Asian groups in guerrilla warfare and terrorism (Gunaratna 2016). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Southeast Asian states promulgated the ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counterterrorism in November 2001. The declaration committed the ASEAN member states to prevent and suppress all terrorist acts, review and strengthen national mechanisms against terrorism, and reinforce cooperation at bilateral, regional, and international levels (Febrica 2010). In July 2002, the ten ASEAN member states and the United States signed a joint declaration on counter-terrorism. The agreement was a political statement confirming the ASEAN's commitment to the war against terrorism. It stipulated the importance of a framework for cooperation to prevent, disrupt, and combat international terrorism through the exchange and flow of information, intelligence, and capacity-building (Emmers 2003). Moreover, after the Bali bomb attacks in October 2002 that killed almost 200 people, many ASEAN member states became concerned about terrorism threats in the top of their security agendas. As a result, the heads of state and government signed another Declaration on Terrorism during their summit in early November 2002, pledging to implement the previously adopted anti-terror measures. This document stipulated that the ASEAN countries would continue with practical cooperative measures among themselves and the international community (*Ibid*.).

In 2007, ASEAN signed the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT). It was complemented in 2009 by the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter-Terrorism. These two documents form the Association that serves as an efficient platform for member states to promote moderation, engage in continuous dialogue on counter-terrorism policies, exchange best practices, and promote research into innovative ways of countering violent extremism (Borelli 2017).

For the past seven years, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have been vigilant over concerns that the ISIS militant group would inspire attacks in their territories (Schulze and Liow 2019). Regional security forces have been alert to the potential threat from the returnees from Syria and Iraq. This is because counter-terrorism has always been prioritized since the 9/11 attacks and the Bali bombings in 2002. The caliphate's declaration in mid-2014 and revelations that the Southeast Asians fought in Syria, have further hastened counter-terrorism efforts in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (*Ibid*.). In Indonesia, counter-terrorism operations mounted by both Detachment-88 (Densus-88 or National Police Counterterrorism Squad) and the BNPT (National Counterterrorism Agency) have pinned down militant ISIS sympathizers in Poso, Central Sulawesi. The new anti-terrorism law passed on May 25, 2018 broadens the definition of terrorism and grants the police more preemptive arrest powers. Under this new law, any behavior that threatens security is considered terrorism. Nevertheless, many sources of terrorism are still present and have not been addressed. However, this law is a significant step in Indonesia's fight against terrorism (Suryadinata 2018). In Malaysia

and Singapore, security agencies have used internal security legislation to curtail the ISIS-inspired activity and arrest suspected ISIS sympathizers. Similarly, while several militant groups in the Philippines have sworn allegiance to ISIS, their activities remain confined to the archipelago's southern regions, in Sulu, Basilan, and Mindanao. However, authorities in the Philippines are worried that an attack may happen in Manila (Schulze and Liow 2019). The Philippine government has already distinguished a growing threat of ISIS affiliates in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. This is evidenced by the Abu Sayyaf kidnappings and the execution of foreign hostages, which have underscored the lack of control the Philippine government has over its southern reaches. The national security team of newly inaugurated President Rodrigo Duterte has declared the eradication of Abu Sayyaf its priority. However, without a concrete plan to renew the peace process in the southern Philippines, the Sulu archipelago's remote islands continue to provide a safe hideout for ISIS-inspired militants (Steckman 2016). These developments increase the concern for regional governments and the United States, which has expanded counter-terrorism intelligence-sharing efforts with Malaysia and Singapore over the past year. Ultimately, the ISIS's message has limited appeal in most of Southeast Asia. However, the group's ability to evolve, adapt, and exploit cracks in a region with porous borders and limited state capacity should arouse concern (Kusuma 2018).

In April 2016, at the Putrajaya Forum, another opportunity was offered to outline the agenda for the next round of ASEAN meetings. The Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen took that opportunity to disclose specifics about three security areas prioritized by the city-state. The first on Ng's list was counter-terrorism. This was no surprise, given the heightened threat around terrorism, particularly following the siege by Islamic State-backed militants in southern Marawi City the previous year, as well as Singapore's role in formulating a regional response to the challenge (Parameswaran 2018). Since 2014, Singapore has shown the most vigorous international responses in addressing the ISIS threat. In December 2014, Ng Eng Hen announced that the Singapore Armed Forces would deploy KC-135R tanker aircraft for air-to-air refueling, an Imagery Analysis Team, and 50 to 60 soldiers to join the multi-national coalition efforts to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria (Febrica 2017). However, until the siege of Marawi in 2017, the governments in the region fought the ISIS-centric threat using the same foundation created to battle the al Qaeda-centric threat. The Marawi case confirmed the new heights reached by the terrorism threat in Southeast Asia. When ISIS fighters launched the Marawi siege, ASEAN governments understood that cooperation between the countries was insufficient and incomprehensive. Until the Marawi siege, the Philippines did not publicly acknowledge that ISIS had dominated Mindanao, and regional governments did not adequately share intelligence on the developments. The affected countries called for enhanced regional efforts to combat terrorism and other related emerging threats to maintain peace and stability (Singh B. and Singh J. 2019).

In October 2018, the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), proposed by Indonesia, launched the intelligence initiative called 'Our Eyes'. In this initiative, the defense ministers of the ASEAN have agreed to share intelligence to combat future threats of terrorism, radicalism, violent extremism, and other non-traditional threats in the region (Gnanasagaran 2018). This significant initiative is a common response from ASEAN countries to strengthen cooperation and collaboration among member states and fight terrorism. However, the mission is not simple because countries of the region

continue to be sensitive about sovereignty and non-interference norms (Gunaratna 2016). For a long time, the ASEAN member states treat counter-terrorism as a domestic issue, and national counter-terrorism instruments within Southeast Asia still differ widely. For instance, there are differences between the law enforcement in charge of counter-terrorism in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as the military in Thailand and the Philippines (Borelli 2017). The securitization of terrorism generated different responses among states in the region (Febrica 2017). Moreover, according to Febrica, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia governments played a dual function. They have been the audience in their bargaining process with others and served as the communicator to its domestic audience simultaneously (*Ibid.*).

In response to the 2016 Jakarta attacks, Indonesia has recently amended existing laws pertaining to terrorism, reflecting on the 2018 new law on counter-terrorism. These revisions allowed security forces to pre-empt terrorism acts rather than react to them after they have happened. Recommendations for legal reform have been submitted to the parliament to that effect. These include the introduction of detention without trial for purposes of investigation, a redefinition of terrorism, swifter approval of electronic surveillance, as well as the arrest of individuals involved in military training overseas and the revoking of their citizenship (Schulze and Liow 2019). Also, there has been considerable pushback against ISIS ideology, though it needs more action. Indonesia is home to two of the world's largest Muslim mass movements, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Arifianto 2021). NU and Muhammadiyah claim memberships of 40 million and 30 million, respectively (Hasan 2018; Arifianto 2021). Both are considered mainstream Muslim organizations widely accepted and popular among Indonesians. Their leaders and clerics are respected internationally as Islamic scholars of considerable repute. Furthermore, both have launched their programs to counter the narrative of ISIS and other radical groups. Similar efforts at countering the ISIS narrative are observed in Malaysia and Singapore, albeit on a smaller scale. Nevertheless, such efforts could be further enhanced by greater cooperation and collaboration among them, especially given that ISIS's threat is transnational (Schulze and Liow 2019). Thailand is in the process of drafting a new Counterterrorism Act, which aims at integrating the existing terrorism-related laws into one document. Thailand continues to apply the 2017–2021 National Counterterrorism Strategy for the prevention of and response to terrorist attacks, but details of the strategy have not been made public. Under the strategy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains plans for collaboration with foreign governments (Yurachat and Sirivunnabood 2021; Cogan and Mishra 2021).

In a regional security context, one of the greatest challenges is the policing and governance of the tri-border waters encompassing the Sulu Sea (Philippines), waters off Sabah (Malaysia), and the Celebes or Sulawesi Sea (Indonesia). This region presents a significant problem in the ease of movement for militants and terrorists across borders. Over many decades, this region has developed its political economy, involving the movement of militants and terrorists, as well as human and arms trafficking. Local authorities are often either unable to curtail such activities or complicit in them. The challenge posed by the ungoverned space in this tri-border area requires multi-national co-operation to surmount because they are incapable of policing this vast and complex space. This region has emerged as a safe haven for terrorists, evident from the difficul-

ties faced by regional security forces in apprehending militants from different groups ensconced in the Sulu archipelago (Schulze and Liow 2019).

In the post-covid-19 era, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrated its commitment to combat terrorism at the 3rd Sub-Regional Meeting on Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Security held on 1 December, 2020. The meeting explored two main issues: 'The Impact of COVID-19 on the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Security Environment' and 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) Regional Preparedness.' In looking ahead to 2021, the ASEAN member states should also pre-empt how these two issues could influence FTFs travel in Southeast Asia, particularly in the maritime domain (Pantucci 2020; Basit 2020).

Conclusion

There are contradicting statistics on the number of the SEA fighters and militants that joined ISIS in its core region. However, evidence show that the Southeast Asian dimension of ISIS was given a formal expression with the formation of Katibah Nusantara in 2016, which included a Malay and Indonesian speaking fighters in Syria. The ISIS extension in the region was represented by the commander of the Islamic extremist group, Abu Sayyaf, the emir of Wilayat Filipines Isnilon Hapilon, and emir of the East Asia Wilayat Abu Abdillah. Since Southeast Asia is one of the expected alternative destinations targeted by ISIS after its defeat in Iraq and Syria, the consequences of this defeat must be integrated into the regional counter-terrorism strategies in SEA. Therefore, the ASEAN and its member states continually adopt various initiatives, programs, policies, and strategies. Such policies include the 2018 Southeast Asia Counter-Terrorism Symposium, which sought a collective approach to regional counter-terrorism and 'Our Eyes' initiative launched in the same year. The defense ministers have identified terrorism as the most serious threat to their region and a severe threat to ASEAN's progress, prosperity, and way of life. However, several factors make Southeast Asia to continually face critical challenges in this process. These include the non-interference the ASEAN principle, as well as the different views and responses to ISIS securitization in the ASEAN member states of Muslim majority and minority societies. The securitization of terrorism in the Southeast Asian region is not a new process. This is because threats to the security agenda become an ASEAN commitment in the framework of the international war against terrorism, particularly after the Bali attacks in 2002. During that time, many ASEAN member states had prioritized terrorism threats in their security agendas. There is a necessity to enhance the past counter-terrorism mechanisms and strategies used by the Southeast Asian countries for almost two decades. This is because ISIS brings a new type of terrorism characteristics, such as the multi-national coalition of groups, the possession of a multi-national military capability, the control of large swathes of land, the existence of a government, and the ability to regularly attack and defeat the local and international enemy.

NOTES

[*] The organization is banned in Russian Federation.

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