



# Executive Memorandum

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## PROMOTING A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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While some countries in Southeast Asia have made considerable progress combating terrorism, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia's premier multilateral organization, collectively could accomplish much more. That should be the message Secretary of State Colin Powell brings to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Brunei on July 31.

ASEAN as an organization has done relatively little to coordinate the substantial counterterrorism efforts of its member states—a response to the problem of terrorism that is symptomatic of its chronic inability to coordinate its member states into collective action on any front. Applied military cooperation between ASEAN states is rare and often late in coming. Yet terrorism is so deeply entrenched in Southeast Asia that uprooting it will require more than local initiatives by each state. Counterterrorism efforts in Southeast Asia are a drain on America's military. The United States should encourage and support regional cooperation that maximizes the region's limited resources and reduces its dependence on the United States. It would also help to refurbish ASEAN's reputation as little more than a talk shop.

**Security and the War on Terrorism.** Every year, foreign ministers from ASEAN's 10 member states (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) meet with their counterparts from 11 "dialogue partners" (Australia, Canada, China, the

European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States), as well as Mongolia and Papua New Guinea, in a consultative forum to discuss security issues in the Asia Pacific. When Secretary Powell attends this meeting, he should ensure that the war on terrorism remains at the top of the agenda.

Individual Southeast Asian nations have contributed to the war on terrorism already, stepping up enforcement of existing counterterrorism laws or enacting new ones to give law enforcement agencies more power to track down terrorists. Malaysia arrested some 62 terrorists with global links, including members of Jemaah Islamiah, an al-Qaeda cell that planned to bomb U.S. embassies in the region. Singapore established a National Security Secretariat to "develop a more coherent and integrated approach to ensuring Singapore's national security," particularly against terrorism. Other countries have undertaken similar measures.

Secretary Powell should thank these countries for their cooperation and encourage other countries to

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increase their efforts to apprehend terrorists. Indonesia, for instance, has yet to undertake a serious investigation of Abu Bakar Bashir, the Jakarta-based cleric who founded Jemaah Islamiah.

#### **Increasing Applied Security Cooperation.**

Despite the efforts of individual countries, much more should be done by the group to enhance security. ASEAN's bedrock principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its members has fostered an institutional aversion to applied cooperation. Furthermore, a certain amount of mutual distrust lingers from unresolved territorial disputes as well as the Cold War rivalry that once divided the region.

For such reasons, the Philippines turned to the United States rather than Singapore for logistical support and technical expertise after recognizing that its military was ill-equipped to deal with jungle-savvy Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. Yet Singapore, its neighbor and fellow ASEAN founder, quietly possesses the most sophisticated military in the region that has many of the same capabilities provided by the United States. Though Manila did not ask Singapore for help, neither did Singapore offer it.

Fighting terrorism collectively can be a practical confidence-building measure and an opportunity to establish formal security cooperation procedures. Such cooperation exists on an ad hoc basis. For instance, the Philippines arrested Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, a key al-Qaeda demolitions expert, following a tip from Singaporean authorities. Such cooperation could disappear without any formal procedures once the exigency of September 11 diminishes. To prevent this from happening, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have signed a trilateral Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures. The rest of ASEAN should follow suit.

Once established, security cooperation could expand to other areas unrelated to terrorism. Southeast Asia is rife with inter-communal discord, based sometimes on religion and sometimes on ethnicity. Fortunately, the region is diverse enough to have objective parties that can negotiate and enforce peace settlements. For example, because a majority of Thailand's population is neither Christian nor Muslim, Thai diplomats could broker dis-

putes between some of Indonesia's warring communities, such as in the Moluccas Islands, and Thai soldiers could serve as peacekeepers.

Secretary Powell should suggest that future ASEAN military exercises be modeled on the successful Balikatan ("shoulder-to-shoulder") exercises between the United States and the Philippines. Unlike previous exercises, this year's Balikatan was conducted on Basilan, where the Abu Sayyaf terrorists were holding Americans hostage. U.S. and Philippine forces were able to carry out training missions that coincided with an ongoing military operation. The joint exercises forced the Abu Sayyaf to flee Basilan and led to the conclusion of that hostage crisis.

This model could be applied to other security problems. For instance, combined naval exercises could be conducted in the Malacca Straits, where the incidence of maritime piracy is the highest in the world. ASEAN should conduct such operations on its own, and Secretary Powell should encourage additional expanded exercises to include other members of the ARF.

**Conclusion.** Though the customary "ASEAN way" has been not to interfere with the internal affairs of one's neighbors out of respect for their sovereignty, the emergence of terrorism and other transnational crimes demands a regional response. As the only multilateral organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN should be the vehicle for such collective action. In the upcoming ARF meeting in Brunei, Secretary Powell should make sure that terrorism remains a top priority and recommend that the region deal with the problem collectively.

Military cooperation should be viewed not as a relinquishment of sovereign responsibility but as an extension of national resilience, because it improves the region's ability to resist external threats. Fighting terrorism together would build trust among ASEAN members and offer an opportunity to establish formal security cooperation procedures that could be applied to other conflicts as they arise.

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