How the US Counters Terrorism in the Southeast Asia

In its global anti-terrorism strategy, developed in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, the administration of the then-president George W. Bush assigned the countries of the Southeast Asia the role of a "second front" in this battle. This decision was adopted since:

- the region is known as a place with a concentration of Islamist terrorist groups supported and financed by al-Qaeda.
- they are mostly fighting the "external enemy" — the US and its allies, and are to a lesser extent pursuing the goal of overthrowing democratic regimes and subduing parts of the region to the authority of the Caliphate.
- Southeast Asia is vulnerable to the spread of terrorism because it is home to a large number of Muslims, constituting 25% of the total global Muslim population; it also is known for harboring Islamist separatist movements; there is no tight border control, which facilitates interactions between global terrorist organizations; and its counter-terrorism services are unproductive.

Based on the above observations, American experts have tagged this region "a breeding ground for the flourishing of terrorism."

The global war on terrorism declared by the US put the countries of the Southeast Asia in a rather difficult position where they have to teeter between the need to cooperate with the most influential political power on the international arena on the matter, which for each is of a different priority level, and, at the same time, exercise caution dealing with that part of the Muslim society, which shows anti-American sentiment because it believes that the US anti-terrorist operations are aimed at weakening Islam. This tricky situation predefines the different forms of cooperation with the US, based on the assessed "advantages" and "disadvantages" of specific actions.

Nevertheless, none of the countries of Southeast Asia that has had problems with terrorism have declined to collaborate with the US. Their decision to collaborate was driven not so much by the realization that they would be backed by the US in their attempt to cope with this threat, but mostly due to economic and geopolitical considerations — strengthening ties with the US and ensuring the balance of power in the region remains unchanged.

The US chose Indonesia and the Philippines as its priority subjects of interaction on this matter based on the assessed potential terroristic threat. Indonesia put emphasis on the development of its institutional basis for the successful countering of terrorism. In 2003, after an attack on Bali, a special anti-terrorist police unit "Special Detachment 88" was created with the financial and logistics support of the US. Annually, the US allocates $40 million to support the operation of this unit. Judging by the results of a meeting between Barack Obama and Joko
Widodo held in October 2015, the US intends to continue its cooperation with Indonesia in the field of terrorism suppression.

As for the Philippines, another form of counter-terrorism cooperation was introduced there. Unlike in Indonesia, the duty of combating groups of terrorists and separatists acting in the Islamic South of the country was imposed on the army. To entrench military cooperation between the two countries, a rapid-deployment task force was created and 1,200 American soldiers joined Filipino troops. They were tasked with supporting Filipino military personnel, but their mission had to be limited only to the rendition of advisory and reconnaissance services because of the increasing public discontent with the presence of American troops in the country.

In addition to the US military assistance, the Philippines received a financial incentive for joining the global war on terrorism in the form of an annual bonus of $100 million to fund its counter-terrorism operations and also enjoyed some economic and trade benefits. But in 2015 the established form of the counter-terrorism partnership between the US and Philippines had to be readjusted to reflect new security priorities — the regions of the Middle East and the South China Sea. This is why the US took the decision to cut its military assistance to the Philippines. According to the official explanation of the reason for which the cut had to be implemented, the Philippines had allegedly achieved a significant breakthrough in this field (though this explanation contradicts the reports showing an increased number of acts of terrorism committed by Abu Sayyaf—the most notorious Islamist organization) and that due to the revamping of the Philippines counter-terrorism strategy, the duty to combat terrorists was transferred to the police forces.

As for Thailand—another main non-NATO ally—initially, the US declared they would not get directly involved in the fight against terrorist groups in the Muslim South of the country since they did not want Thailand to turn into yet another international front of the war on terrorism. Besides, unlike the extremist groups in Indonesia and Philippines, their peers in Thailand did not have ties with international terrorist groups. Nevertheless, the US (which traditionally perceived Thailand as its main outpost in Southeast Asia) believed it was its duty to help the country in its struggle against terrorism as part of the operations of a joint counter-terrorism reconnaissance center established back in 2001. The US also wanted to expand military and technical cooperation with the country. Although the US suspended military aid to Thailand in response to the May 2014 military coup, no data has been published on how such suspension affected the counter-terrorism cooperation of the two countries. Thailand still participates in the U.S. Department of State counter-terrorist program.

As for Malaysia, its attitude toward accession to the American anti-terrorist bloc was rather ambiguous. Though the country’s officials and Mahathir Mohamad himself openly criticized the US military policy pertaining to the suppression of terrorists in the Middle East and Afghanistan, in reality they were interested in a more profound military cooperation with the US, which expanded significantly after September 11, 2001. Anti-terrorist cooperation with the US, which has been improving in the recent years, is, however, limited to only legal support of the counter-terrorism operations and the training of personnel.

The US has been working closely with Singapore, which conducted a series of successful large-scale anti-terrorist operations after September 11. The countries shared intelligence information concerning the activities of terrorist organizations. The Singapore authorities, which traditionally advocate the presence of the US in the region, use the war on terrorism as an excuse to expand military cooperation with America and boost national security.

The efforts of Washington in the creation of a system of bilateral relations with the countries of Southeast Asia (to combat terrorism), based on the principle of a “hub and spokes,” have paid off. The war on terrorism has opened new possibilities for the US to increase its military and diplomatic presence in the countries of the Southeast Asia, which, in turn, benefited from this cooperation as they received additional financing, expanded trade and economic collaboration and strengthened their operational capabilities. From 2002 to 2013, the US granted $262 million to Indonesia in financial aid to support the country's security. The Philippines received $441 million.

It seems that the task the US has set for itself in the global war on terrorism has ultimately been accomplished in Southeast Asia: terrorist organizations are disorganized and have been degraded to something more like criminal structures; their leaders have either been eliminated or sentenced to long-term imprisonment; there have been no major terrorist attacks since 2009. However, with the emergence of ISIS, the threat of the revitalization of terrorism and it spreading in the region has become real again.

The reaction of the US to the changes in the situation in Southeast Asia is expressed in the September 2015 report, issued by the International Authority on the Development of Indonesian and Malaysian Support of the Islamic State. The report shows that the US and the countries of the Southeast Asia have similar assessments of how ISIS can
threaten their security. However, today, unlike in the previous years, the US no longer defines Southeast Asia as the second front in the war on terrorism and limits its cooperation mainly to the: (1) support of moderate Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia where religious tolerance has been on the decline in recent years; (2) rendering support in the monitoring of the activities of extremist groups and in the research of this problem. These activities are regarded as the means for the deradicalisation of Islamists and are seen by the countries of Southeast Asia as priority in their countering of terrorism. They recommend that the US use their experience of a “low-key approach” in combating terrorism.

The fact that the leaders of the countries of Southeast Asia were reluctant to support the attempts of Barack Obama at the November 2015 summit of the ASEAN to enhance the anti-terrorist component of the program of the meeting, despite the information suggesting that acts of terrorism were being plotted in Kuala Lumpur, is noteworthy. And not only because another problem — the conflict in the South China Sea — surfaced as a paramount issue, but mostly because the countries of Southeast Asia do not demonstrate the determination or desire to fight a new global war on terrorism (with the exception of Singapore) in the framework of an international coalition organized by the US.

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