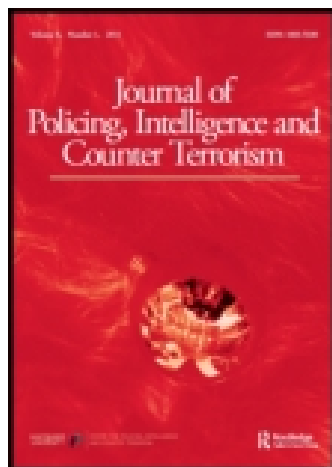


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The Council for Asian Terrorism Research (CATR)

PROFESSOR THE HON PETER ANDERSON*
CATR Chair, 2008-2009

Introduction

In the initial months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the United States received widespread global support for what the Bush administration had begun to call its “global war on terror.” Over time, however, as the US war on terror expanded its reach beyond al-Qaida’s safe haven in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the US approach came under criticism from allies and partners for its focus on military responses to what many regarded as a threat with primarily political, social, and economic roots and an excessive focus on religiously-motivated “jihadists” at the expense of other, largely secular, but no less dangerous, violent extremist movements. The term “war”, which implied an organised and centralised opponent in control of territory and populations and thus subject to military “defeat”, created false expectations and led to the unfortunate misperception that the United States was leading a “war on Islam”. Experts across the Asia-Pacific region warned that the terrorist threat in the region was much more complicated than the focus on al-Qaida, involving loose networks of violent groups – some jihadist but others not – who traded resources and know-how, but did not necessarily have a central leadership or shared agenda. To understand and cope with this threat landscape would require a multilateral approach, in which states across the Asia-Pacific region could work together to develop comprehensive approaches in response to a complex threat.

By late 2004, it had become apparent that the roots of the jihadist terrorism that had produced the 9/11 attacks reached far beyond Afghanistan. In fact, it had become clear by 1995 already, when Philippine police broke up a plot involving Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed to bomb multiple commercial aircraft en route from Southeast Asia to the United States, that operational and organisational links existed between Al-Qaida and regional jihadist groups in South and Southeast Asia. A series of events in the months and years following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, however, increased the urgency for counter terrorism partnerships in Asia. In December 2001, Singapore security forces uncovered a Jemah Islamiyya (JI)

* This article was written in close collaboration with Drs Caroline F. Ziemke and Kongdan Oh Hassig, who provided invaluable notes and sources of information.

conspiracy to launch multiple suicide bombing attacks on Western embassies in the city-state. In October 2002, JI operatives conducted a devastating car bomb attack in Bali, Indonesia, that killed 202 people from 22 countries, including 88 Australians. The SuperFerry 14 bombing in the Philippines in February 2004, conducted by the Abu Sayyaf Group, killed 116 people. Increasingly, the United States was coming under criticism for a counter terrorism strategy that focused too narrowly on Al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Iraq, relied too heavily on the use of military means, and did not take sufficient advantage of the considerable experience and expertise of potential Asian partners. A highly-networked threat would require a networked response. It was in this atmosphere that the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the United States Pacific Command asked the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) – a non-profit, federally-funded research and development center (FFRDC) in Alexandria, Virginia – to explore the landscape of terrorist threats in Asia.

The birth of the CATR

The IDA research team undertook, as a first step in its analysis, to organise a symposium to bring together leading terrorism experts from across Southeast Asia to assess the nature and depth of the terrorist threat in the region. In light of the common criticisms of US counter terrorism strategy – that it was too unilateral, too focused on jihadist movements at the expense of other threats, too reliant on kinetic responses, and did not sufficiently reflect the true nature and complexity of the terrorist threat – IDA undertook to organise the conference as an exercise in strategic listening. Rather than bring Western experts in to lecture the Asians on how to solve their problems, the conference gave Asian analysts a platform from which to inform American policymakers on the nature of the terrorist threat as seen through Southeast Asian eyes. Under the guidance of Dr. Kongdan Oh Hassig, IDA drew on its extensive network of academic and government contacts across Asia to assemble a group that included both leading scholars and officials and young, rising stars in the field of counter terrorism research. The international symposium, entitled “The Dynamics and Structure of Terrorist Threats in Southeast Asia” was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 18-20 April 2005. Co-hosted by IDA, the US Pacific Command, and the newly-established Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT) – part of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the symposium brought together over thirty experts from across the region, including academics, journalists, policymakers, and military, intelligence, and law enforcement officials.

The quality of both the papers delivered in formal sessions and the informal discussions that emerged during the Kuala Lumpur conference exceeded everyone’s most optimistic expectations. Multilateral forums the world over, but especially in Asia, have the reputation of being staid and formalised affairs. At the close of the meeting, a consensus emerged that the sponsoring institutions needed to find a way to maintain the momentum of positive and creative exchange of ideas that had started over the course of the three-day symposium. The majority of attendees agreed that both government and non-government efforts to develop a better understanding

of the roots of the terrorist threat and, more importantly, to develop effective, cooperative approaches to countering it, would benefit from the establishment of a formal organisation dedicated to a sustained dialogue and cooperative research on terrorism and political violence in Southeast Asia. IDA's sponsor from the Office of the Secretary of Defense agreed to provide initial funding for such an organisation, and the Council for Asian Terrorism Research (CATR) was born. As a multilateral institutional forum for the exchange of information and development of regional analytical capacity, the CATR was the only organisation of its kind in Asia, although in March 2009 a subset of institutional members of CATR from South Asia joined forces to create a similar research consortium for that region.

IDA drafted a charter for the CATR, which it presented to representatives from four institutions that had participated in the Kuala Lumpur symposium; the State Islamic University of Indonesia (UIN), the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at Nanyang University, Singapore, the International Centre for Terrorism Research and Conflict Management, Sri Lanka, and the SEARCCT (Malaysia). A Steering Committee was formed to meet on the UIN campus in Jakarta in July 2005 to draft a set of general principles for the CATR and agree on a final charter. The charter went into effect with the establishment of a permanent CATR Board of Governors at the First Biannual CATR Symposium in Denpasar, Bali on 19 October 2005. Since the establishment of the CATR in 2005, its scope has expanded to include South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia and its membership has grown to include 18 institutions from 13 nations across the Asia-Pacific region. The CATR has a rotating institutional chairmanship. The UIN (Indonesia) served as the first CATR Chair, followed by the Strategic and Integrative Studies Center (Philippines), and the SEARCCT (Malaysia). Macquarie University's Centre for Policing, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism (PICT) became Australia's lead institutional representative on the CATR Board in 2007 and assumed the CATR Chair in November 2008.

The CATR at work

Almost immediately out of the gate, the CATR came face-to-face with the disruptive effects of terrorism and political violence. The Jakarta Steering Committee had agreed that the First Biannual CATR Symposium should be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka; but a few short weeks before the meeting was to convene, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister was assassinated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), resulting in a declaration of a state of emergency. In the ensuing atmosphere of tension, the Sri Lankan government warned the organisers of the Colombo meeting that it could not guarantee the security of CATR participants and recommended that the meeting be cancelled. The CATR's institutional Chair at the time, UIN, stepped into the breach and offered to host the re-located CATR Symposium in Denpasar, Bali. Then, on 1 October 2005, a series of suicide bombings killed twenty people in Kuta and Jimbaran, Bali. Despite travel warnings issued by several of the members' governments, the CATR participants were unanimous in their determination to go ahead with the Bali meeting with renewed resolve. Thanks to the UIN organisers,

CATR members, and the gracious people of Bali, the First Biannual CATR Symposium was a great success. As part of the meeting, CATR participants had the opportunity to observe first-hand the immediate and devastating consequences of terrorism – not only the physical destruction at the bomb sites but also the socio-economic cost to the Balinese people whose livelihood depends so heavily on the tourist industry, which had just begun to recover from the devastating October 2002 bombings. As soon as Sri Lanka lifted its state of emergency, the CATR elected to hold its second Biannual Symposium in Colombo in March 2006. Again, the CATR experience was enriched by the opportunity to learn first-hand how living with an ongoing insurgency shaped the lives of ordinary citizens and, more importantly, how communities like those in Bali and Sri Lanka pull together to overcome the disruptive effects of those who use violence to achieve their goals at the expense of the innocent.

As of mid-2009, the CATR has held six more biannual symposia, hosted by institutions across the CATR region; Goa, India (October 2006); Manila, Philippines (March 2007); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (November 2007); Sydney, Australia (April 2008); Tokyo, Japan (November 2008); and Jakarta, Indonesia (April 2009). The articles that appear in this issue of the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism* represent just a few of over sixty scholarly papers presented at the eight CATR Biannual Symposia. In addition, the CATR has hosted a series of special roundtables in conjunction with some of its meetings; The Future of Terrorism Research in Asia (March 2007), Terrorist Use of the Media (November 2007), Cyber terrorism (April 2008), Nuclear and WMD Smuggling (November 2008), and Pesantren Education (April 2009). The CATR published its first collaborative research product, a CATR White Paper entitled “The Asian Security Landscape after the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq” in November 2008, which it launched at its first open symposium before an audience of over 100 experts in Tokyo on 12 November 2008. In January 2009, the CATR introduced a monthly electronic newsletter, “Asian Conflicts Reports”, which publishes short articles on timely subjects by CATR members and other regional experts. Among the topics covered in the first six issues of “Asian Conflicts Reports” are; the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, the fall of the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the March 2009 mutiny of the Bangladesh Rifles, and the July 2009 suicide bombings in Jakarta. In late 2009, the CATR will launch a website that will provide wider access to the CATR’s analytical products, as well as an online forum for sharing news and ideas on a wide range of topics related to terrorism and political violence in Asia. The CATR’s increased interest in producing collaborative, widely-disseminated research products, such as the White Papers and “Asian Conflicts Reports”, marks an important milestone in both the CATR’s institutional culture and the nature of counter terrorism cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

The CATR organisational culture

According to its charter, the CATR was established “for the purpose of providing systematic ways for promoting and sharing regional research on terrorism and counter terrorism and enhancing the capabilities of member institutions and countries in the Asia-Pacific region to counter terrorism, drawing on the unique strengths and

perspectives of each member". The underlying philosophy of the CATR is that the best way to build such a network is not through a series of one-off academic conferences but through building sustained relationships among a core membership. While the CATR always welcomes new participants to expand its analytical and knowledge base, the group's primary emphasis is on sustaining and encouraging contact between its core institutional members and individual participants, many of whom have been involved in the CATR since its inception. As a result, CATR discussions and analyses are characterised by a level of frankness and openness that is rare in any institutional forum, and particularly so in Asia. In its early stages, participants in CATR meetings felt strongly that, in order to maintain the atmosphere of open exchange of ideas and information, the group should maintain a relatively low public profile. All discussions at CATR conferences were, and continue to be, conducted according to the Chatham House rule of non-attribution. CATR proceedings were circulated widely among government agencies in the member states, but the CATR did not publish materials for public distribution or provide press information about its meetings. Over time, however, the CATR's institutional members have come to support the idea that the CATR should share its insights and analytical products with a wider audience, and each CATR Biannual meeting now includes at least one public session open to local experts, the media, and other interested parties.

The CATR brings together representatives of government counter terrorism centres, strategic analysis institutes, military research centres, staff colleges, and major secular and religious universities, along with prominent academics and journalists from across Asia. In addition, the CATR attempts to encourage and give a forum to rising young analysts in the field and bring its members into contact with other specialist groups, such as journalists, law enforcement officers, and religious educators. The goal of the CATR's biannual conferences is to share new and unique insights into the Asian security landscape, threats, and capabilities from the perspective of the local experts and authorities whose primary mission is to track them. It promotes productive dialogue among counter terrorism experts and policymakers across the region with the goal of facilitating the rise of a regional counter terrorism analytical network to which all the CATR members' nations have access. The CATR has paved the way for cooperative and comparative analyses of the roots of terrorism, the nature and motivations of terrorist and insurgent organisations and their leaders, and the varieties and relative success of local approaches to countering terrorism, political violence, and the violent ideologies that promote them. Over the past five years, the CATR's focus has expanded to include other non-traditional, transnational security threats, including organised crime, piracy, cyber-terrorism, arms and drug trades, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other advanced weapons technology in the hands of dangerous non-state actors.

A compatible vision

The governments and institutions involved in the CATR are committed to eliminating terrorists and violent extremist ideologies from the political landscape of

South and Southeast Asia, and they are eager to do so in close partnership with the United States, Australia, and other partners. At the same time, however, they express concern that the “globalist” perspective can lead to a tendency among Western analysts and policymakers to see other kinds of terrorist threats from local, regional, and criminal organisations as derivative and peripheral to the global “jihadist” threat. South and Southeast Asian nations face threats from terrorism in their own local and regional, social, and historical contexts. In South and Southeast Asia, political violence, whether conducted by militant jihadists, ethnic and religious separatist groups, or other political dissidents long predated the emergence of al-Qaida. Terrorism in the CATR regions is the product of long-standing local conflicts with deep historical roots that, while complicated by the infiltration of Arab Wahhabism and the presence of al-Qaida, would likely continue to fester even if the US succeeded in eliminating the global jihadist movement.

These regional partners in the war on terror encourage their Western partners to broaden the focus of counter terrorism strategy, coordinate with them, and take their interests to heart in responding to *all levels and dimensions* of the terrorist threat, not only the ones that relate directly to al-Qaida’s campaign against the West and its citizens and interests. The CATR provides a vehicle through which regional partners promote a research agenda that looks beyond the single ideological threat of militant jihadist terrorism, to the broader and historically deeper political, economic, religious, and social roots of terrorism and political violence in the Asia-Pacific region. In particular, they seek to shift the analytical focus away from what they see as the mischaracterisation of terrorism as a religious rather than a social, political, and economic problem. The Western focus on “violent Islamist extremism” as a “monolithic” threat obscures many important features of the threat, including the role of family ties, the importance of local political and economic agendas, and the role of small-groups psychology and social networks in spreading radical ideologies and recruiting potential terrorists and creating social tolerance for violent political ideologies. CATR members promote a greater focus on the evolution of terrorist and insurgent groups and the threats they pose. Only in this way, they argue, will it be possible to anticipate the emergence of new groups and tactics while they are still small and dispersed and, hence, more easily countered.

Over the course of its development, the CATR’s participants have come to the understanding that success in building effective collaborative responses to terrorist and insurgent threats does not require ideological or analytical conformity. What it does require is the emergence and negotiation of compatible visions that follow from mutual understanding of each state’s unique perspective, challenges, and cultural and political context. The CATR, through its symposia and publications, provides a valuable window into the underlying rationale of its members as they struggle, individually and collectively, to respond to the emergence and evolution of a constantly shifting landscape of violent transnational and non-state threats. It also provides its members with an opportunity to influence how those visions will evolve over the years ahead, and, perhaps, to convince their regional partners that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously.