Singapore's Threat Outlook 2017: The Terrorist Challenge Ahead

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Synopsis

The 2016 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) report by the Institute for Economics and Peace has ranked Singapore as one of the safest countries in the world, maintaining its position of last year. While this attests to the efficacy of Singapore's counter-terrorism efforts, the unceasing threat of terrorism calls for steadfast vigilance, preparedness and resilience at all levels of society.

Commentary

THE 2016 GLOBAL Terrorism Index (GTI) report by the Institute for Economics and Peace lists Singapore among the 34 safest countries in the world with the lowest ranking of 130. Notwithstanding, Singapore needs to stand ready against terrorist attacks as the ranking excludes factors that are difficult to quantify such as foiled terrorist plots and radicalisation. Furthermore, *Daesh* – another name for the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) - has called for its supporters overseas to launch revenge attacks on member countries of the US-led global coalition. This includes Singapore which also hosts foreign interests of these countries such as their corporations and embassies.

As a small country in a volatile region, Singapore may be affected by the security headwinds from neighbouring countries such as the Philippines (ranked 12th in the GTI index), Thailand (15th), Indonesia (38th) and Malaysia (61st). With the availability of jihadist publications in Bahasa such as Al-Fatihin newspaper and a Bahasa version of *Rumiyah* magazine which replaces the earlier *Dabiq* series, Southeast Asia is increasingly important in *Daesh's* strategic calculus.

Two-fold Threat

The military setbacks that *Daesh* faces in the Levant may not foreshadow its collapse but rather its possible shift from a caliphate to a clandestine organisational model not unlike Al Qaeda's; and more ominously its greater leverage on attacks in non-conflict zones (for e.g. Europe, Australia and Southeast Asia) by lone wolves and pro-IS groups, and ideological and physical threats from returning fighters heading to or transiting through the region.

Several developments in 2016 define the two-fold nature of the terrorist threat that Singapore faces.

First, online radicalisation will continue to be the principal purveyor of extremism in highly digitised societies with strong anti-terrorism laws. The experience in Singapore is not dissimilar. Radicalised individuals detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) were almost invariably influenced by the extreme rhetoric of groups like *Daesh* purveyed on the Internet and social media. The actions by radical activists and "influencers" who promoted armed jihad and contributed to the radicalisation of others add another dimension to the threat.

Second, foiled terror plots by foreign individuals that were radicalised or linked to Daesh or pro-IS regional militant groups underscore the growing reach of global terrorism to Singapore. The plot by Katibah Gonggong Rebus (KGR), a Batam cell led by Indonesian Gigih Rahmat Dewa who was endorsed by Bahrun Naim, a purported leader of the Syria-based Katibah Nusantara, to attack Singapore's Marina Bay area exemplifies the direct threat from pro-IS terrorist groups in Southeast Asia.

The arrests of 40 radicalised Bangladeshi workers under the ISA in November 2015 and March 2016 for terrorism-related activities, including support for groups like *Daesh* and plans to stage attacks back home, also underline the indirect transnational threat from within and beyond Southeast Asia.

Countering the Threat

Singapore has enhanced its counter-terrorism (CT) strategy through a multifaceted approach to address the evolving threat of terrorism.

Protection and Response capabilities are strengthened through physical and legal measures such as the Police Emergency Response Teams, PolCam or police cameras initiative and counter-financing of terrorism regime. Community involvement is galvanised on a greater scale through various initiatives (for e.g. mobile App and neighbourhood CT exercises) under the overarching SG Secure movement; and complemented by the "Let's Stand Together" campaign which raises public awareness on national security issues.

To curtail the spread of extremist ideology, Muslim community leaders and asatizah (clerics) are enhancing religious guidance through several initiatives such as the mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS), a mobile App and helpline by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), and the toolkit "Resilient Families – Safeguarding against Radicalisation" by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to serve as a guide for parents and teachers.

Singapore also pursued deeper international cooperation with its closest neighbours during the international conference on CT in Bali in August 2016 by mooting the systematic exchange of biometric information of known terrorist fighters and persons convicted for terrorism, and institutionalised sharing of best practices.

Looking Ahead

Given the dynamic global terrorism landscape, Singapore will have to continue improving and adapting its CT measures to new developments and challenges.

The likely collapse of the caliphate may see foreign fighters, including those from Southeast Asia, returning home and continuing *Daesh's* jihadist and expansionist agenda in the region. Already, *Daesh* has recognised and accepted the allegiance of a group of Malaysian and Filipino jihadists who call themselves "Islamic State Philippines" in south Philippines. Returning fighters could also potentially be galvanised by unfolding local and regional grievances such as the Rohingya issue that are framed through ethno-religious lenses. These risks may unfold over the next few years with their implications yet to be seen.

Social media may facilitate such risks besides continuing as the medium for radicalisation, thus perpetuating the challenges to law enforcement and intelligence efforts in preventing terrorist activities. Religious leaders play a crucial role in pro-actively verbalising their counter narratives to refute *Daesh's* ideological rhetoric in cyberspace.

While the prospects of disruptive cyberattacks by terrorists in the near future may be uncertain, Internet disinformation such as unsubstantiated messages on terror threats and hateful content risks spreading communal distrust and rocking social cohesion. This will destabilise societies in ways that actual terror attacks similarly seek to achieve. In sum, Singapore must continue to adapt its CT measures to address the constantly evolving nature of the threat of terrorism.

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