



Asymmetric Terrorist Alliances: Strategic Choices of Militant Groups in Southeast Asia*



Iordanka Alexandrova**

[*Abstract*]

Why do some local rebel groups choose to form asymmetric alliances with large transnational terrorist organizations? This paper examines asymmetric terrorist alliance patterns by studying the international ties of domestic insurgencies in Southeast Asia. It uses data from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand to construct a theory defining the determinants of the choice of alliance strategies by terrorist groups. The findings conclude that rebels with limited aims prefer to act alone out of fear of entrapment. They are cautious of becoming associated with the struggle of transnational radical groups and provoking organized response from international and regional counterterrorism authorities. Local groups are more likely to seek alliance with an established movement when they have ambitious final objectives, challenging the core interests of the target state. In this case, the benefits of training and logistic support provided by an experienced organization outweigh the costs of becoming a target for coordinated counterterrorist campaign.

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** Research Professor, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea, silvermist@korea.ac.kr.

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I . Introduction

The global war on terror is moving to Southeast Asia. First, Al Qaeda, and later, the Islamic State (IS) sought to expand their influence in the region as a manner of compensating for the loss of territory in their traditional zone of action. The two groups have claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in Indonesia, the Philippines, and most recently in Malaysia. In all cases the attacks were organized with the assistance of local rebels whose aims were initially unrelated to the global agendas pursued by the two radical jihadist organizations. In 2016, more than sixty local groups were believed to actively support IS. Militants in the region are steadily becoming more ambitious and increasingly violent. Some of them, however, are yet to be associated with the transnational terrorist networks active in neighboring states. Thus while rebels in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines formed alliances with international jihadists organizations, Thailand's homegrown terrorists continue to be independent (Abuza 2011).

Operating under similar conditions some rebel groups formed alliances with international terrorist organizations, while others continue to act alone. Why do some insurgents choose to forgo the benefits of cooperation? Put in general terms, when do local rebel groups form asymmetric alliances with large international terrorist organizations?

Understanding the incentives to ally faced by terrorist organizations is essential when choosing the appropriate strategies to counter the threat. At the international level, response to global terrorist networking includes breaking the links between patrons and local groups (Rabasa et al. 2006a: 161). This can only be achieved if the utility of an alliance for each of the sides is clearly understood. At the local level, government efforts effective against the type of local groups unlikely to cooperate with an international organization would be counter-productive against militants who could not be

deterred from escalating the level of violence. In the first case, negotiations and appeasement could potentially bring the rebels into the regular political process; in the second, anything short of a firm denial strategy would create favorable conditions for the organization to find allies and present a challenge to the stability of the state.

Effectively containing rebels prone to allying with international terrorist organizations is important for several reasons. First, alliances affect terrorist behavior. Interaction with fundamentalists, such as Al Qaeda, contributes to the radicalization of religious rebel groups and the expansion of their aims. Due to the influence of their patrons, their ambitions outgrow their original agenda, threatening targets beyond the borders of the original host state (Abuza 2002, 2003; Basile 2004; Adamson 2005; Matthew and Shambaugh 2005). Second, terrorists connected with strong experienced allies tend to become more effective and deadly (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008a, 2008b). Ties with global organizations make local terrorists more dangerous. They acquire technology and knowledge and benefit from shared financing networks, thus achieving higher success rates in their attacks. Lastly, cooperation allows international terrorist organizations to increase the threat they present to state governments (Cragin et al. 2007). Close ties with local ally groups enables them to escape counterterrorist actions by sending fighters to train in the secret camps of the local militants, hiding financial assets in different states, and exploiting an expanded pool of potential recruits who are harder to detect for their lack of apparent affiliation with the broader jihadist cause.

Existing studies fail to offer satisfactory answers to the questions posed here. Alliances between terrorist organizations are widespread and dangerous, but remain undertheorized and asymmetric relationships are particularly neglected. Many experts agree that groups sharing either ideology or enemy occasionally ally in pursuit of their goals (Asal et al. 2016; Phillips 2018). Compatible beliefs and aims, however, are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for cooperation, particularly when the potential allies are not involved in a common conflict. Studies that stop short of specifying the strategic calculations behind local rebels' alliance decisions are

ill-equipped to explain the variation in outcomes in Southeast Asia, where some local groups choose to ally with international terrorist organizations while others actively avoid any association. Some scholars have explored the puzzle from the perspective of global terrorist groups by looking for the reasons why they seek the cooperation of local insurgents and the factors that affect the success of their efforts (Bacon 2017). Area specialists among them have studied Al Qaeda and IS's growing networks specifically in Southeast Asia (Abuza 2002, 2003; Febrica 2010; Harris-Hogan and Zammit 2014; Gunaratna 2017). These works provide a solid basis for further research, but highlight the need for a theory explaining the strategic considerations of local militant groups that allows international terrorist organizations to take root in the region.

This article aims to fill the gap in the literature and offer a systemic explanation for the divergence of alliance decisions between militant groups in Southeast Asia. The main argument is that rebels choose to engage in alliances based on rational utility calculations of the costs and benefits of cooperation. Groups in Southern Thailand with limited aims prefer to act alone out of fear of entrapment. Their fight for autonomy of the Patani region does not necessitate the significant increase in operational capabilities that can only be achieved through an alliance. At the same time, they are cautious of becoming associated with the struggle of global Jihadists and provoking organized response from local and international authorities. In contrast, groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines formed alliances with international terrorist organizations to gain access to the expertise and resources that would allow them to pursue ambitious objectives that threaten the existence of the rival state in its present form. For them the benefits of training and logistic support from a larger organization outweigh the costs of becoming a target for a large-scale counterterrorist cooperation.

This research examines asymmetric terrorist alliance patterns by studying the international ties of domestic insurgencies in Southeast Asia. It uses data from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand to uncover the reasons leading to the choice of alliance strategies by terrorist groups. The study highlights

the differences in behavior between seemingly similar rebel groups by focusing on the varying objectives they pursue. It relies primarily on secondary data sources as gaining access to terrorists for research purposes remains problematic.

Terrorist alliances are defined here as pacts for continuous conscious cooperation in preparing and conducting operations between two terrorist organizations. Cooperation may include sharing of training facilities and expertise, financial contributions, and joint attacks. The alliances are rarely formal in the sense that no legal agreement needs to specify the conditions for action. Some groups such as Al Qaeda require a *bayat*, formal pledge of loyalty from its allies, but this is not a necessary condition for the existence of an alliance (Kirdar 2011). Asymmetric are alliances formed between organizations with a significant disparity in capabilities in terms of operational proficiency and available human and financial resources.

The local rebel groups chosen for this study are small insurgencies counting no more than several hundred members. They are selected based on the similarities allowing for controlled focused comparison of cases with varying outcomes. All of them originate from a repressed minority in the host state, profess beliefs compatible with the religion of potential patron organizations, and use terrorist tactics to advance their agendas. These are Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines, the Southern insurgency in Thailand represented mainly by Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), and several emerging militant groups in Malaysia.

Transnational terrorist organizations are groups with active operational cells in more than one country pursuing a global agenda. They are hubs in terrorist networks with large membership and high lethality rate. Two such groups currently operating in Southeast Asia are Al Qaeda and IS.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section proposes a theoretical framework detailing rebel groups' strategic considerations in deciding whether to ally with an international terrorist organization. It is followed by an empirical evaluation of the

alliance choices of local insurgencies in the Southeast Asian region. A concluding section sums up the findings and offers some implications and directions for further research.

II . Theoretical Framework

Local rebel groups ally with international terrorist organizations when the benefits of association are higher than the costs. The benefits of an alliance for the rebel group are increased capability for executing attacks and the costs stem from the entrapment resulting from the commitment. Rebels with limited aims who are highly dependent on the population of the contested area prefer to act alone to avoid being associated with a global radical cause and becoming the target of large-scale counterterrorist efforts. Insurgencies with ambitious agendas and weak ties to the local population seek cooperation with international groups to increase the chances of achieving their objectives.

Terrorist organizations are strategic actors performing according to a collective rationality. They make informed judgments based on experience and logical reasoning to maximize the chances of achieving their objectives. A group evaluates possible lines of action and chooses the one that promises the highest rewards at the lowest cost. Militants need to calculate what methods will help them overcome the problem of significant power disparity between themselves and the target state without provoking overwhelming retaliation. While the choice of strategy does not have to follow an established decision-making procedure, the group as a whole ultimately adopts the behavior that proves to be most efficient in pursuit of its goals (Crenshaw 2008; Oots 1986). Differences in opinion between separate factions regarding the aims of the movement are resolved in one of two ways. The group can negotiate a compromise and agree on a final objective and an appropriate common line of action. Alternatively, the rebels can split into subgroups, each pursuing its own proclaimed agenda as happened when members of the Muslim separatist movement in the Philippines, dissatisfied with the moderate approach of the main

organization, left to form the radical ASG. The newly formed factions generally differentiate themselves from each other and act as separate groups.

The benefits of terrorist alliances can be narrowed down to enhanced capability for launching attacks and added legitimacy to the rebels' cause. Access to training and expertise increase the success rate of small groups' assaults and the international network of an ally helps with procurement of funds, weapons, and technology. In addition, association with a global struggle adds appeal to the local group's cause and creates publicity. These benefits improve the rebels' chances of achieving their political objectives by increasing their coercive leverage and expanding the pool of potential recruits to the cause.

The fastest way for a local rebel group to improve its operational capabilities is through cooperation with an experienced organization. Through joint training the militants gain knowhow and improve the effectiveness of their assault tactics. They often learn techniques tested in previous operations of the patron and unavailable to outsiders (Cragin et al. 2007). A terrorist group's capabilities to carry out attacks are categorized according to five thresholds: having basic knowledge allowing it to kill or injure around 50 people in a single assault; possessing ability to target foreign nationals; capability to kill or injure more than 150 people in a single strike; ability to assail guarded targets; and ability to perform coordinated attacks (Cragin and Daly 2004: 14). Rebels receiving training from organizations of the caliber of Al Qaeda (rated 5 on a 0 to 5 scale) can expect to graduate to the final level in a relatively short time. Apart from technical skills, international organizations share funds and the financial networks required to move them with their local allies.

Association with a global organization increases the credibility of local militants before a broad audience. A local insurgency's appeal normally does not transcend the confines of a small region. It may find it challenging to gain support from outsiders who would view the group as no more than a criminal gang pursuing a narrow agenda. Being "accredited" from a widely known organization

provides a small group of rebels with a ready running platform that can be used to appeal to populations outside of their original area of operations. This creates a recruitment pool, which can be used to gain more members and replace battle losses. For this dynamic to apply, the allied groups need to share a minimal common ideological denominator as radicals with fundamentally different systems of political or religious beliefs cannot appeal to the same audiences (Karmon 2005).

The principal costs of terrorist alliances are decreased security and loss of local support. Association with an international terrorist organization guarantees that a group will be entrapped in a global fight and targeted by international counterterrorist authorities. There is also the risk of alienating domestic supporters if the ally organization's agenda is inconsistent with local values or the methods it uses are particularly extreme.

Paradoxically, by becoming more operationally efficient, a rebel group may become less secure. Cross-border alliances between terrorist organizations invite attention from multiple states and provide incentive for legitimate coordinated retaliatory action against the rebels.¹ Common threats such as transnational terrorist activities create incentives for dialogue and facilitate communication between governments that would otherwise have no basis for cooperation. Organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have developed mechanisms for joint counterterrorist action, which specifically address transnational terrorism and cannot be effectively utilized when the threat is purely domestic. The main belligerents in the war on terror, led by the United States, also provide direct financial and military assistance to countries where local terrorist groups are identified as indirect challenge to their own national security. As international counterterrorist cooperation is more effective than single state efforts, a rebel group faces increased level of threat to its existence by entering an international alliance.

¹ For this reason, most rebel groups deny all connections to international terrorist organizations. The nature of cooperation is different from interstate alliances where the value of the alliance as a deterrent grows when the adversary is aware of its existence.

Association with an international terrorist organization may result in loss of local support for a rebel group. First, it leads to an increase in the levels of violence above the threshold tolerated by the average public, alienating all but the most radical supporters of the militants. Second, it involves the targeting of foreign civilians that are not necessarily seen as enemies by the local population. Lastly, as it causes increased retaliatory action by local and international counterterrorist authorities, the community hosting the rebel group often suffers collateral damage. Ultimately, the militants face a tradeoff between maintaining the support of the local population and benefitting from an alliance with a skilled patron.

Additional costs in asymmetric alliances may include the risk of loss of policy autonomy and exploitation of local resources by the international terrorist organization. The weaker side may find that while it provides recruits and bases for operation to the patron, its own interests are not considered and that it does not receive support in pursuing its original agenda. This is likely to create further tensions between its fighters and the local population, which will be unwilling to bear the costs of supporting a fight for a purely foreign agenda. In this sense, the motivations of the international organization in seeking connections with a local group will affect the calculations of the potential costs of an alliance.

The central problem here is to determine when local rebel groups find allying with international terrorists more useful than harmful. This kind of cooperation is a high-cost strategy that would only make sense when the stakes are also sufficiently high. The reason is that an alliance maximizes the coercive potential of a group at the expense of the security of its members. Rational actors would only accept the risk if the expected returns justify the investment or if the goals are unachievable by alternative means.

In general, rebel groups pursue either limited objectives, such as a change in policy or ambitious aims involving a major revision of the status quo. Limited objectives include equal treatment of a minority, some level of regional autonomy, or the displacement of certain political elites. Being rarely incompatible with the vital interests of the rival state, such goals can be achieved through

bargaining and negotiations. Ambitious are objectives requiring radical changes such as a new form of government, the creation of a new state, or the abolition of an existing one. Such extreme aspirations require the authorities to relinquish control of the state apparatus, which makes them unlikely to be fulfilled by peaceful means. The nature of a group's goals determines the likelihood of success of a rebellion and the range of its supporters, which in turn affect the value put on the benefits of cooperation with an international organization relative to the costs.

Local rebel groups with limited objectives will calculate that the costs of allying with an international terrorist organization outweigh the benefits. For them, the increase in operational capabilities resulting from cooperation with an experienced patron is of limited value, insufficient to offset the costs of increased counterterrorist activity. Moreover, as limited aims promise returns only for the local population, maintaining its support is valued higher than attempting to expand the appeal of the group to a transnational audience.

Rebels with limited aims are likely to be successful without forming alliances. Their agenda can potentially be achieved by peaceful means if the government of the rival state commits to negotiations. Such fighters generally use low-casualty demonstrative and destructive forms of terrorism to draw attention and mobilize support that will pressure the authorities to change policy and avoid doing serious damage to maintain sympathy for the cause.² Tactics of this kind can be employed with the resources available to a local group. Alliance with a patron organization has few benefits because it does not significantly affect the chances of fulfilling the final objective of the rebellion, even if it brings operational expertise. At the same time, association with a global terrorist network will threaten the existence of the movement by making its militants a target for international counterterrorist efforts. Faced with overwhelming power, the minority that produced the rebellion may even be forced to cease resistance and accept a truce on terms that

² I use the distinctions provided by Robert Pape in discussing the different forms of terrorism and their objectives (2005: 10).

cement the unfavorable status quo.

The risk of alienating the local population acts as an additional deterrent preventing groups with limited aims from associating with radical international organizations. As the rebels claim to act on behalf of the people in the contested region, the aim of securing the political freedom or equal treatment for the oppressed minority creates legitimacy for their militant activities. In this sense, the support of the local community is vital for the continued existence of rebellion. An alliance with an international terrorist group will erode that support, without replacing it with any tangible benefit. A global radical organization can promote a local agenda before a broader audience, but this is unlikely to cause an upsurge of foreign recruits because the success of the rebellion can offer few material or moral rewards to actors from outside the contested region.

Domestic insurgencies pursuing ambitious agendas will seek cooperation with international groups to gain a chance in achieving their goals. If the main objective of a group is a major change in the status quo, such as gaining control over the state, the benefits of cooperation will outweigh the costs. Such groups stand less to lose in terms of local support as their hope is to appeal to a broader audience than the population in their main area of operations to recruit more sympathizers sharing their extreme views.

A local group with ambitious aims cannot hope to be successful without forming an alliance with a patron organization. Its agenda presupposes achieving full victory against a state, which requires maximal levels of operational proficiency and capability to inflict significant damage. This includes the use of suicide terrorism aimed at creating a high number of casualties, to increase the coercive leverage of the insurgents against the authorities. In addition, given the difficulties of sustaining a rebellion over a long time, the time horizons of the fighters will be relatively short. Calculating that they are unlikely to complete their aims alone over a brief period of time, they will seek tactical support from organizations with experience. As an alliance is necessary for the success of the rebellion, the militants will be less sensitive to the costs of cooperation.

An asymmetric alliance will create publicity and expand the recruitment pool of an ambitious group. Rebels seeking control over a state rarely have strong ties with the people inhabiting their main area of operations. As their aims outgrow the agenda of an oppressed minority, they cannot claim to represent the population of the contested area, which may include the entire territory of one or more states. Such groups can instead hope to gain legitimacy for their actions by being associated with the ideological cause of an international organization. Additionally, ambitious groups will expect that the extreme methods necessary for the pursuit of their objectives will inevitably alienate the majority of the average public. If the patron group has a significant number of radicalized adherents, this will produce exposure to a larger audience and allow the protégé to recruit among a wider base of supporters. They will not be deterred by fears of losing the little local following they may have.

The theory assumes that international organizations always try to attract local rebel groups to their cause. Maintaining alliances in different regions significantly strengthens global terrorist networks at an affordable cost. They gain agents furthering their strategic interests, expand their pools of recruits, and benefit from access to the training camps and logistic networks of local groups in their native countries.

In sum, the theory presented here argues that militant groups with limited agendas relying on the support of the local population will avoid allying with international terrorist organizations. Rebels who pursue ambitious objectives will choose to benefit from cooperation with larger, more experienced groups. The next section assesses the plausibility of this theory against four cases in Southeast Asia.

III. Terrorist Alliances in Southeast Asia

Two international terrorist organizations trying to gain influence in Southeast Asia are Al Qaeda and IS. Al Qaeda's penetration of the region started in the 1990s and accelerated after the crackdown on

its activities in the Middle East in the early 2000s (Abuza 2002). IS is currently actively recruiting support from radicalized Southeast Asian Muslims sympathetic to the idea of establishing states governed by Sharia. The group is seeking connections with local rebels sympathetic to its cause in an effort to increase its global influence and build an additional outpost for the jihadists in their fight against the West. Both organizations are attracted to the permissive environment of states where governments have relatively weak capacity to counter terrorist activities. The presence of elements within the population that are receptive to their cause makes the region particularly appealing. The readiness of local rebel groups to form alliances with the global actors varies depending on the rational calculations of the benefits that cooperation can bring.

3.1. Indonesia

In Indonesia, JI chose to increase its strength by allying with an international terrorist group, in this case Al Qaeda. The alliance significantly contributed to JI's capacity to organize and carry out lethal attacks increasing its capability to pursue its political goals. The clear association with a global terrorist network and its agenda, however, instantly made the group a target of international anti-terrorist efforts, ultimately leading to its rapid decline. The rising levels of violence alienated the public, undermining the rebels' position in the homeland. Recognizing the high costs associated with the alliance, moderate members of the group's leadership signaled intent to reject violence and further involvement with extremist networks. The more radical members, harboring ambitions unlikely to be satisfied through negotiation with the government, however, continue to place higher value on the benefits of cooperation with a patron organization.

JI was founded in 1993 with the aim to unite Indonesia, Malaysia, and several other countries under a pan-regional Islamic Caliphate ruled by Islamic law. Its base of operations is Indonesia, with four command centers, called "mantiqis," stationed in different parts of Southeast Asia, reflecting the group's wide regional ambitions. The main targets of the group are Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States. JI is funded through

membership donations and business activities, many of which are of criminal nature (Abuza 2003). The group never enjoyed popular support and did not benefit much from its ties with the local population.

Jl has formed a strong long-term alliance relationship with Al Qaeda. Starting in 1998, the international terrorist organization has consistently provided funding through bank transfers or cash funds, training, and bomb-making expertise to the local militants while encouraging attacks on Western targets. Jl on its side assists with recruiting and establishing cells serving as outposts of the radical jihadist network in Southeast Asia.

Jl's connections with Al Qaeda have deep roots going back to the time when the group was first created. Jl was born out of resistance against the leadership of the decades-old Darul Islam group, which became increasingly passive in the fight for the implementation of Islamic law in Indonesia (Dewanto et al. 2013). Its founders, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir started building their network in Malaysia in the late 1980s while hiding from a prison sentence for their ties with the main movement. Soon after, they began sending Muslim volunteers to join the fight against the Soviet army in Afghanistan. The men that had been through the training camps and battlefields in South Asia received combat practice and became indoctrinated in fundamentalist ideology. This is where they first formed relationships with Osama bin Laden and other leaders of Al Qaeda (Gordon and Lindo 2011).

The willingness to commit to cooperation with Al Qaeda was not shared among all members of Jl. Moderate factions believed the implementation of Osama bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa* calling for a holy war against the West to be inconsistent with Jl's long-term strategy of gaining mass appeal through religious indoctrination (ICG 2004). However, members stationed in the region covered by Mantiqi I – Singapore and Malaysia – wished to adopt Al Qaeda's global agenda and pressured for attacks on Western targets and immediate action in Indonesia. Although Hambali (Riduan Isomuddin), the chief of operations for that region, originally had no intention to attack US targets, his position changed during his involvement with the patron

network and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed—the mastermind of the 9/11 plot—in particular (9/11 Commission 2004: 150).

Leading the fighters who supported the *fatwas*, Hambali went on to organize and execute lethal attacks on the territory of Indonesia. On October 12, 2002, they detonated several bombs in popular tourist locations on the island of Bali, killing 202 people. The attack was professionally executed and demonstrated JI's increasing capacity as a militant organization.

The Bali bombings precipitated a split in the organization. The moderate faction insisted on distancing from Al Qaeda and focusing on their primary objective to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia only. Fighters committed to building a regional Caliphate continued to plan and execute high-casualty attacks across the country supported by the extremist patron. While it is not clear whether there is an actual division within the organization, it can be seen that the group pursuing a more ambitious agenda is more inclined to cooperate with an international organization, while those members envisioning more modest objectives disapprove of the relationship.

Lethal attacks on Western targets continued to take place despite internal disagreements. Abu Bakar Bashir embraced the fight against America as his own and propagated waging *jihād* against the West, although he insisted that westerners should be attacked on their own territory (Atran 2005). Regardless of rhetoric, further attacks in Indonesia, such as those in Jakarta in 2003, 2004, and 2009 were linked to Noordin Mohammad Top, leader of the Malaysian JI splinter group loyal to Al Qaeda. In 2016, another attack in Jakarta was linked to IS, showing that JI was committed to maintaining ties with major terrorist organizations and that it was forging new alliances.

According to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, prominent figures in the leadership of JI, including Hambali, decided to seek alliance with Al Qaeda because their objectives were unachievable without the resources that the bigger organization could supply (9/11 Commission 2004: 152). He reportedly spent years developing connections with operatives from the patron organization and

sending recruits to be trained in camps in Afghanistan to build a network of strong recruits (Kuppusamy 2003).

The benefits of the alliance for JI were substantial. Teaming up with Al Qaeda significantly improved JI's attack capabilities. Indonesian fighters trained in international camps acquired skills they could not have developed independently in a short time. Their deadliest operations were executed by members who had lived and fought in Afghanistan. In addition, the group enjoyed financial support from bin Laden and his associates, as well as free access to their global money laundering network. Al Qaeda sponsored the 2002 Bali bombings and other attacks by directly sending funds to the radical members of JI who could then perform the operations without having to seek the approval of factions that opposed this approach.

The moderates in JI were correct to anticipate strong governmental response to Al Qaeda's involvement in the country. As soon as Indonesia's rebels were associated with the infamous group, they quickly became targets in the global campaign against terror. At the first signs that Al Qaeda had a support base among local extremist groups, Indonesia was promptly included in a short list of target countries as the US planned to expand its war against Al Qaeda beyond Afghanistan. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz stated that "going after Al Qaeda in Indonesia is not something that should wait until after Al Qaeda has been uprooted from Afghanistan" (Ch and rasekaran 2002).

US experts believed that there were links between Al Qaeda and local extremists as early as 2001. They worried about "sleeper cells" being set up in the country that could be activated as the global network's strongholds in Afghanistan became threatened. Concerns about the safety of Americans at the scene increased as local militants appeared to be associating with Al Qaeda and its global jihadist agenda. At the time, there was no evidence for Al Qaeda's ties with local militant groups and the plan was based on suspicions of training operations conducted by the group with the support of local Muslim militia Laskar Jihad, whose representative denied the allegations. Laskar Jihad was among several groups

actively backed by JI before it dissolved.

International efforts brought results. Intra-agency cooperation led to the arrest or killing of many of the organization's leaders. In 2003, Hambali was captured in Thailand and transferred to Guantanamo "to face prosecution for terrorist activities against the United States." (DOD 2008).

The Indonesian government stepped up its efforts to curb JI's activities after becoming convinced that the group was supported by Islamic radicals. Sponsored by the United States and Australia, the Police Force's special counterterrorism squad Detachment 88 played the lead role in curbing JI's activities in the country. The squad was formed in 2003, but became fully operational after 2005, succeeding in incapacitating the most violent factions in the rebel organization (Gordon and Lindo 2011).

The Al Qaeda-inspired attacks in Bali produced strong public opposition to the *jihād* and JI in general (Lim 2005). This change in public opinion regarding JI's actions was the necessary condition that allowed the government to adopt an aggressive approach against the militants. While the group never had a strong support base among the general public, in the early 2000s, politicians in Indonesia risked alienating a significant portion of the Muslim population by authorizing firm response against JI. Several deadly attacks linked to Al Qaeda were enough to erode support for the rebels' cause among Indonesians and the government was free to pursue them without fearing electoral backlash (Gordon and Lindo 2011).

Despite the risk, Indonesia's most sophisticated terrorist organization maintained an alliance with Al Qaeda to maximize its fighting capabilities. The rebels paid the cost of this cooperation and JI suffered significant damage after becoming a target in the international fight against terror. Many of its most prominent leaders were captured in international counterterrorist operations and its support among the general population in Indonesia withered beyond repair. Some members of the group insist on focusing on ideological propaganda to gain more popular support for the cause and avoid being associated with a global radical group singled out

as the main enemy in the global war on terror. Others, however, continue to attach more value to the benefits of cooperation with a strong ally. Strategic reasoning may lead JI to distance itself from the methods and the global radical agenda promoted by bin Laden in the short term. But in the end, since the group has ambitious long-term objectives, it is likely to continue to rely on cooperation with larger terrorist organizations to increase its capabilities to further its political aims.

3.2. Thailand

Insurgent movements in Southern Thailand take great caution not to be identified with global terrorist organizations, thus effectively remaining outside the scope of concern of international counterterrorism initiatives that focus mainly on trans-national threats. Their limited aims and high-reliance on the support of the local population make the rebels averse to allying with a large international terrorist organization.

Organizations resorting to terrorist tactics in Thailand consist of Malay-Muslim rebels operating in the southern parts of the country. For half a century they have demanded autonomy and the creation of an Islamic state on the territory of the three provinces incorporated into the Thai state by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 – Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Militants act from numerous urban cells heavily relying on the support of the local population to avoid detection. Since 2001 there has been a noticeable rise in the intensity of attacks and their level of sophistication. The choice of targets has become more explicitly religiously motivated, leading to worries about the possibility of the insurgency transforming into a new front for global jihadism (Chalk 2008; ICG 2016).

Thailand's Malay-Muslim insurgency holds the potential of outgrowing its national agenda and becoming connected with transnational extremist groups, but so far the conflict has not become a part of a broader jihadist struggle. Although recently attacks have become more sophisticated, militants have deliberately made an effort not to be related with a jihadist cause, which would turn them into target for international antiterrorist efforts. Security

officials and other specialists agree that they have made a strategic decision to not seek alliance with global terrorist networks to avoid first a crackdown on the insurgency, and second, alienating the local population (ICG 2005; Chalk 2008).

The rebels did not avoid allying with an international Islamist organization for lack of potential partners or because they do not expect to gain much from such cooperation. Both Al Qaeda and IS have been actively working to increase their presence in the country. Since Al Qaeda started expanding into the region back in the early 1990s, a few of its fighters are known to have used Thailand as a base for operations. A weak state, lax regulations on the movement of people and finances, and easy access to training facilities and weapons, on top of existing underground networks of rebels sharing an ideology compatible with their own, present an ideal environment for extremists to hide and develop their fighting capabilities (Abuza 2002). Thai militant groups could have established strong ties with the international organization if they perceived this to be in their interest.

The Southern insurgency could benefit significantly in terms of increased capabilities by allying with an established terrorist organization. At present, the number of incidents is rising, but the insurgency lacks organization and the ability to produce sophisticated bombs (Chalk 2008). As JI's experience has shown, by allying with an international organization, domestic groups could quickly achieve a new level of professionalism by participating in training, sharing weapons-related expertise, and gaining access to substantial funds.

By not allying with an organization with the global exposure of Al Qaeda, however, Thailand's insurgency successfully managed to avoid both focused international and domestic counterterrorist action. International institutions dealing with terrorism in the region did not get directly involved in what was considered to be a local affair. Their role with regard to internal insurgencies is limited to assisting with counterterrorism capacity building through bilateral or multilateral incentives under the flag of ASEAN and other regional organizations. The effectiveness of such incentives depends most of

all on the willingness and commitment of member-states to participating and applying the provided guidelines within their own borders. As Thai authorities failed to appropriate the resources made available through ASEAN, the rebels never had to worry about evading advanced counterterrorist measures developed by international experts.

Absent sufficient incentives, the Thai state hardly demonstrated any improvement in its ability to fight Malay-Muslim militant groups in its Southern provinces. The levels of violence increased in the early 2000s, with fighters resorting to the use of bombs and drive-by shootings. The insurgents claimed close to 6500 lives between 2004 and 2017 as the Malay minority actively opposed assimilation with the rest of the society (Domínguez 2015). By 2016 the rebels had successfully expanded their activities beyond the Southern regions and launched attacks in major tourist resorts, including Phuket and Hua Hin. The capacity of the police and the army to prevent future bombings in highly populated areas, however, failed to evolve and match the insurgents' improving capabilities (Chalk 2008).

The ineffectiveness the government's efforts is due less to the lack of interest in countering the insurgency and more to the relatively low priority of the issue. The Thai government started developing a strategy for dealing with the unrest in the Southern provinces since violence levels increased in 2004. The Royal Thai Police and the Royal Thai Army deployed more than twenty thousand security personnel in the region by 2006. Paramilitary rangers, various village defense units, and even a teacher-protection battalion supplemented the efforts of the specialized units (ICG 2005). Security forces in the country, however, continue to be unable to control what has become the deadliest conflict in Southeast Asia at present (Abuza 2011). The government relies on a weak intelligence infrastructure and its agents know little about the problem region. There is no strategic framework or comprehensive plan of action guiding stabilization efforts (Chalk 2008). Deployed forces are poorly prepared and coordination between agencies remains problematic (ICG 2005). Several administrations consistently implemented policies that had the effect of increasing tensions while focusing on issues with higher priority and rising political tensions

in Bangkok. Domestic political rivalries affected the Thai state's ability to control the Southern insurgency as politics took priority over the limited security concern (Chalk 2008). As a result, its effort to counter the threat have been sporadic, unfocused, and often counter-productive.

The insurgency's high reliance on the support of the local population also factored in its decision to not ally with a radical international group. The Malay-Muslim minority is economically disadvantaged compared to the rest of the country and suffers from general alienation from other regions. Its distrust in the government enables the insurgents to effectively hide and operate from numerous urban cells without fear of detection. Local citizens, however, are not firmly committed to winning independence and largely disapprove of extreme attacks (Chalk 2008). The insurgents stand a high risk of losing their much needed support by allying with a radical organization and further increasing the level of violence.

By preserving its limited aims and avoiding association with international terrorist networks, the Thai insurgency never became an issue of overwhelming importance in Thailand. The strategy of going it alone and relying on low-casualty demonstrative terrorist tactics adopted by the rebels is effective in generating publicity for their cause, paving the way to a negotiated settlement in the future. As their objective does not threaten the state's core interests, the militants can expect to reach an acceptable agreement without risking entrapment in a costly alliance.

3.3. Philippines

ASG in the Philippines provides support for the argument that rebels enter alliances out of utility considerations rather than based on personal affiliations, shared objectives, or in response to common threats. Its mode of operations exhibits a curious pattern. The group allies with an international organization and increases its capabilities and the intensity of its attacks. The rising level of violence provokes strong counterterrorist response from local and international authorities, significantly weakening the rebels and severing connections

with their current patron. Without external support, the group reverts to kidnap-for-ransom activities to raise funds. The process is then repeated again. As the ambitious agenda pursued by ASG requires significant negotiation leverage against the government, backed by ability to inflict damage, their strategy focuses on rapidly increasing their mastery in carrying out lethal attacks through alliances. Incapable of conducting high-casualty operations alone, the ASG puts a very high value on the benefits of cooperation with an experienced bigger organization. Different factions of the group have allied in turn with Al Qaeda, JI, and IS, depending on their accessibility at the given time. Although these patrons share a broad ideological tradition, they have different goals and different long-term objectives (Byman 2015). ASG partnered with them to increase its coercive capabilities rather than out of perception that they are on the same side in a global struggle.

ASG was founded in 1991 by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani as a Filipino Muslim (Moro) separatist insurgency. It emerged when some members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) refused to accept the outcome of the peace process aimed at establishing an autonomous Muslim region. After Janjalani was killed, the group split in several factions active mainly in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, where reside the majority of the Muslim population of the country (Fellman 2011). ASG's main target is the Philippine government, including the police forces and the military, as well as Christian missionaries and priests. The group is financed through patron organizations, kidnappings, and other criminal activities.

ASG is the most radical of the separatist movements in the Philippines. Rejecting the moderate aims of the MNLF leadership, they declared the goal of overthrowing the Philippine government and establishing a Mindanao Islamic State (Cragin and Chalk 2003). Their objective is, in their own words, no less than "an Islamic state – not autonomy, not independence, not revolution" (Fellman 2011). Emerging out of the disillusionment of radicals with the moderate approach, ASG chooses to act aggressively using extreme high-casualty terrorist tactics. Its founders embraced an ambitious agenda requiring the support of a patron organization to succeed. MILF

serves as a contrast to the ASG by intentionally evading association with international terrorist organizations. They deny any involvement specifically to avoid being targeted in the global war on terror (Rabasa et al. 2006b: 162).

ASG's first ally was Al Qaeda. Abdurajak Janjalani met and possibly fought together with Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Since this early period, when ASG carried out a series of attacks against Christian targets in the Philippines, it was funded, trained, and armed by Al Qaeda. Bin Laden's brother-in-law served as a connection between the organizations and headed charities used to hide the flow of money from Al Qaeda to ASG. Mindanao became a major operational hub of Al Qaeda with many terrorist operations being planned there, before the relationship was ended by focused government efforts in mid-1990s (Abuza 2002).

Having suffered a blow from the military, ASG regrouped and forged an alliance with the largest Southeast Asian terrorist group, the JI. Its expertise, resulting from its own alliance with Al Qaeda, helped the smaller new ally develop more sophisticated attack capabilities. While providing shelter for JI militants, members of the ASG benefitted from training in bomb-making and assistance with funding. The two groups planned and executed several attacks in the Philippines, provoking increase in the intensity of international counterterrorist efforts targeting ASG. Sustained counterterrorist action succeeded in dissolving the alliance by 2007 (Fellman 2011). The benefits of cooperation, however, gave the group a fighting chance against the government and solidified the conviction, among several of the leaders of the group, that the only way to success is through association with an established terrorist network.

Following a period of lower activity, in July 2014, a group of ASG factions committed to yet another alliance. The fighter, designated as their common leader, Isnilon Hapilon, posted a video swearing allegiance to the head of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Hookway 2014).

The group saw significant improvement in its capabilities with each of its alliances. Acting alone, it was able to perform small-scale assaults or kidnapping of foreign nationals. With the support of Al

Qaeda, attacks become more sophisticated and the group evolved from using improvised devices to plastic explosives (Cragin et al. 2007). After experiencing a significant setback due to the dissolution of the alliance with Al Qaeda, joining forces with JI enabled ASG to execute a series of high-casualty operations, including the sinking of the SuperFerry14 in the world's deadliest terrorist attack at sea, claiming 116 lives. In the brief periods when the group was acting without the support of a patron organization, it degenerated into a criminal gang with little political relevance (Abuza 2010). On each occasion, ASG sought partnership with a different international organization in a bid to increase its power.

Every time the ASG formed an alliance, the resulting spike in the levels of violence provoked strong international response. In 1995, successful government counterterrorist operations cut the ties between ASG and Al Qaeda, essentially putting end to their cooperation. In 2001, the US government launched Operation Enduring Freedom to address the terrorist threat in the Philippines as part of the Global War on Terrorism. US soldiers trained local forces in counterterrorist operations and closely assisted local efforts to curb terrorist activities in the southern parts of the country through tactical-level advice and participation in operations. The activities of US special operational forces decisively contributed to the weakening of ASG and drastically reduced the group's ability to launch attacks (Robinson et al. 2016). In 2006, the US led yet another operation, Oplan Ultimatum, killing the top leaders of the insurgency and again diminishing its capacity for action (Fellman 2011).

The Armed Forces of the Philippines performed a series of autonomous successful operations against ASG. The attacks consistently resulted in the death and capture of key figures in ASG leadership. By 2014, the membership of the group declined from more than 1,300 to around 400 militants (Abuza 2010). A key achievement of counterterrorist forces was eroding popular support for the insurgency. An explicit task for the troops was to separate the population from the militants. An assessment of public opinion showed that trust in ASG had declined from 8% in 2011 to 2.5% in 2014 (Robinson et al. 2016).

Concerns about losing popular support, however, do not appear to weigh much in the decision whether to risk association with a global radical network in the case of ASG. The majority of Mindanao Muslims support the more moderate MILF (Cragin and Daly 2004). ASG supporters are so few that the legitimacy derived from joining a bigger cause may be enough to lure more sympathizers from a transnational audience than will be alienated in their home provinces by the radical methods associated with the alliance.

Like JI, ASG maintains alliances with international terrorist organizations to maximize its fighting capabilities. It pays dearly for this association, but continues to attach more value to the benefits of cooperation with a stronger ally. The group's ambitious long-term objectives make this strategy the only choice, providing a chance at success against the state when its vital interests are at stake.

3.4. Malaysia

Malaysia currently has no fully operational home terrorist organization. However, a number of newly established extremist groups appear to follow closely the pattern seen in other countries. They are led by radicalized individuals with ambitious agenda, and who have little or no connection to the local population (The Straits Times 2016/12/18). Emerging as the influence of IS grows, they are potential allies to the jihadist organization that could facilitate its further spread into the region.

Several groups are developing terror cells on the territory of Malaysia at present. The largest of them, Kumpulan Gagak Hitam, numbers around 100 fighters with several possibly already receiving training in IS camps in Syria. This and other groups exhibit coordinated activity suggesting that they are more than recruitment networks for IS.

Newly emerging groups define their objectives as no less than overthrow of the government and “freeing” the population from secular rule. Whether they will grow into functional militant groups is a matter for speculation, but if they do, their behavior suggests that they are likely to ally with an international organization and

rapidly develop their capabilities to execute lethal attacks in pursuit of this ambitious aim.

Cooperation between emerging radical groups and IS resulted in a jointly planned operation in June 2016. IS launched its first successful attack in Malaysia after nine failed attempts with the help of local militants. The organization claimed responsibility after two fighters threw a grenade into a bar in the town of Puchong, west of Kuala Lumpur, calling the attackers “soldiers of the Caliphate from the wilayat of Malaysia.” The suspected mastermind behind the attack was a Muhamad Wanndy Mohamad Jedi, Malaysia’s top IS recruiter who had moved to Syria two years beforehand (Gunaratna 2016). He was also associated with one of Malaysia’s emerging militant groups, Al Qubro.

So far the Malaysian government has been successful in curbing terrorist activities in the country. The number of potential recruits, however, continues to be on the rise (Shah 2016). As in the other cases where rebels have ambitious goals, increased government response does not appear to affect the decision to align with a global terrorist network.

Overall, newly emerging radical groups in Malaysia behave as similar actors in other states did in the early stages of their development. Their priority is to rapidly develop superior capacity for performing attacks through close alliance with an experienced international terrorist organization. Low levels of public support and low dependence on the local population for survival means that they are not averse to adopting a radical ideology and executing high-casualty attacks against targets in their home country.

IV. Conclusion

This article has argued that strategic considerations explain the divergent alliance patterns of local terrorist organizations in Southeast Asia. Thailand’s Southern insurgency avoided allying with a global terrorist organization because the cost of cooperation would have outweighed the benefits and endangered the rebel’s cause. The

limited aims of achieving regional autonomy are within the reach of the militants without help from outside. Association with an interstate jihadist network, on the other hand, would put the group on the radar of international counterterrorist agencies and provoke an increase in government efforts to suppress the uprising. Terrorist groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines formed asymmetric alliances with established international terrorist organizations to increase their capabilities to launch high-casualty attacks. They chose to risk retaliation, because their ambitious objectives require more operational efficiency than they can achieve without outside expertise.

Another determinant of alliance policy is the level of dependency of a rebel group on the local population. In Thailand, the insurgency is closely connected to its local constituency and relies on them to continue its activities. Therefore, it is averse to risking the alienation of the people it represents by associating with a patron having a radical agenda and using extremist tactics incompatible with the local values. Terrorists in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have aims going beyond the liberation of a limited territory. Their extreme views are supported by a small percentage of the local population, which they are not afraid to alienate. Forging ties with radical international organizations promoting a global agenda lends legitimacy to their cause and allows them to appeal to a larger transnational audience.

Contrary to the common view, the local insurgencies and international terrorist organizations discussed here did not form alliances to address common threats. Prior to cooperating, they shared neither enemies, nor targets. If some convergence in objectives did occur, it was a result of the alliance and not a prerequisite for its formation. Rising levels of threat and response to oppression also do not explain alliance patterns in Southeast Asia. The insurgency that suffered the highest level of violence from the government, the Malay-Muslims in Thailand, continues to avoid association with a radical jihadist cause. In all other cases, the rebels willingly accepted an increase in the level of threat as a result of their alliances.

The findings in this article have specific implications for regional security. If international jihadist organizations continue to penetrate the region, domestic terrorism will grow into a transnational threat (Enders et al. 2011). Local rebels could provide a support base for global jihadist groups threatening stability at the regional level. Disconcerting tendencies are already clearly visible in Malaysia. Recognizing that the emerging extremist organizations are likely to follow the alliance patterns of JI and ASG is crucial for producing a timely and effective response to the threat. At the same time, local groups with moderate aims such as the Southern insurgency in Thailand and MNLF in the Philippines can be placated and even coopted by the governments. Being able to identify the groups that are prone to allying with global terrorist organizations will allow counterterrorist authorities to focus on prevention and better tailor approaches to different types of actors.

The questions raised here create the need for further research. Beyond the calculations of costs and benefits, there exist personal sympathies and convictions that define individuals' willingness to cooperate, but these considerations become crucial only if the strategic requirements for alliance are satisfied and as such remain beyond the scope of the present work. Additionally, understanding why some groups pursue ambitious goals would help authorities develop appropriate preventive strategies that could significantly increase the security of the state. A further investigation in the durability of the relationship, the level of autonomy of the smaller group in asymmetric alliances between terrorist organizations, and comparisons of the influence of different types of groups on regional dynamics would also provide many insights needed to develop effective approaches to addressing the terrorist threat on a global scale.

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