

# Trends in International Terrorism\*

Major General Nguyen Hong Quan, PhD®

## Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent “war on terror,” international terrorism has been on the increase in terms of frequency, scale and severity, posing serious threats to national security. The United Nations estimated that there have been over 5,770 terrorist attacks of various scales, causing the deaths of more than 48,170 people, injuring nearly 86,000, resulting in political and social unrest, seriously hurting societies’ morality, and causing great loss of property in a number of countries since 2001.

## Trends in International Terrorism

**Organisational downsizing.** As the “war on terror” drags on, the terrorist groups also adjust their strategies. Terrorist groups tend to downsize by dividing themselves into smaller subgroups. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “lone wolf” terror attacks have been on the rise. International terrorism has established a global terror network, connecting scattered groups around the world. These groups operate independently while maintaining close coordination. Each network is formed by a series of subgroups and individuals. The subgroups usually cover wide areas and operate flexibly.

**New Fundraising Methods.** Today, terrorist groups do not apply traditional fundraising methods but call for support of many individuals, small organisations, and nations. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) is an example. This group generates its revenue through illegal activities targeting property and capital of individuals and organisations doing business within areas under their control. These activities, among others, range from bank robbery, control of oil rigs and refineries, appropriation of property, tax collection,

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\*This article represents the author’s own opinion and not necessarily that of the Institution where the author holds an official position.

®Major General Nguyen Hong Quan, PhD of the Vietnamese Defence Forces is the Deputy Director General of the Institute for Defence Strategy, Ministry of Defence of Vietnam.

kidnapping and calling for financial support from individuals and organisations, including various nongovernmental organisations and foreign terrorists.<sup>1</sup> They even raise funds by taking advantage of social media. IS is controlling huge areas for growing wheat which account for 40 per cent of Iraq's wheat output. They earn money from export of wheat.

Through such methods, IS has become the richest terrorist group in the world, causing lots of difficulties in tracing terrorists' sources of income. These groups hardly spend money on arms production or procurement; most of the money is spent on recruiting, travelling, training courses and so on. IS's diversified financial model ensures its high level of independence from foreign donors. This model facilitates flexibility of administration and building adequate combat capabilities of armed groups, as well as generation of social welfare schemes. IS, therefore, always seeks to control new territories in order to get more resources to cover their expenditure.

**Changing Sites of Attacks.** Terrorists usually target famous cities in the world, which are symbolic representations, or economic and political centres with high population density such as Paris, Brussels, London, or tourism destinations (Nice, France), and hospitals like the one in Pakistan in August 2016 that killed at least 90 people and wounded nearly 100.

**Increasingly Rapid Planning of Terrorist Attacks and Increasingly Shorter Cycles of Operation.** Today, terrorists do not need to devote much time to planning and training as before. As for newcomers, it takes IS about half a year to brainwash and train recruits (as those being identified in Belgium or France in 2015-16) before assigning them to launch terrorist attacks. By the time the security forces are able to identify enough evidence of their terrorist activities, the attacks would already happen.

**Recruiting Pattern.** There has been a change in recruiting new terrorists. In the past, the majority of terrorists came from Arab countries and several European countries, which made it easy for security forces to identify the terrorists. Today, terrorists can be local people, immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, causing a lot of difficulty in identification. As for the IS, this group mainly relies on the Iraqi Sunni population, who were marginalised from Iraq's political and economic life under the Government of Prime

Minister Nouri al Malaki. The group's elites mainly consist of Iraq's former military officers from the era of Saddam Hussein, who are in an increasingly weak position after the Allied invasion of Iraq. In addition, there are other elements from Syrian and Arab society, who regard the IS as their indispensable "temporary companions" to attain their ultimate goals. Finally, thousands of mercenaries from all over the world continue to flood Syria and Iraq to become part of a global Muslim "project."

**Localisation of International Terrorism.** Today, international terrorism has established a close association with crime groups, extremist religious groups, nationalist groups, black gangs, etc., while taking advantage of local forces to carry out terrorist attacks like in the case of Egypt. A number of terrorist groups are being "localised" and become principal "players" in the international "terrorist arena." This is one of the most fundamental changes of international terrorism in recent years.

**Terrorist Attack and Target Diversity.** Terrorists choose from a wide variety of weapons such as guns, grenades, machetes, axes, and lorries. The attack in India and Belgium in 2008 and 2016 respectively and elsewhere even witnessed exchanges of gunfire between police and terrorists. The attacks are coordinated so as to strike different targets simultaneously as it happened in Mumbai in 2008 and 2016 attacks in Paris.

Recent terrorist attacks in the world reveal that terrorist groups have shifted their targets from populous areas to luxury hotels,<sup>2</sup> crowded theaters,<sup>3</sup> non-Muslim areas,<sup>4</sup> taking hostages including citizens of the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Canada, etc. creating fear, panic, and anxiety among other foreigners nearby. Targets of terrorist attacks are not only diplomatic missions, government offices, or military installations, but also less secure civilian facilities.

**Different Aims of Attack.** After the event of September 11, terror attacks have been conducted not only to achieve political aims, but create social instability, public anxiety, and public distrust of government and undermine peace efforts. Terrorists, therefore, tend to target local people or foreigners. After 9/11, mass killings have become terrorists' preference. Terrorism is being increasingly isolated. Facing strong counter-terror efforts, terrorists have gradually given up their conception of combining actions with aims

and simply focused on killings and revenge. This shift has been reflected in the Nice lorry attack on July 14, 2016, in which 84 people were killed.

**Widening Areas of Terror.** In the past, the US and Europe used to be the primary theatres of terrorist activities and counter-terrorism. After 9/11, terror attacks have occurred not only in those two concentrated areas, but also in developing countries such as Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Thailand, and so on. As a result of uneven socio-economic development and religious, ethnic and social contradictions, terrorists find it easy to exploit people in developing countries. Also, counter-terrorism mechanisms in these countries have not been improved, and equipment of security forces are still old and outdated.

**Growing Threat to Nuclear Facilities.** IS's propaganda apparatus has tried to convince people that IS would soon possess nuclear weapons. However, up to now, they have not been able to launch a nuclear attack. Chechen militants placed a dirty bomb containing Cesium-137 in a park in Moscow in 1996. Another Chechen rebel group made a dirty bomb containing an unidentified radioactive material near Grozny in 1998. According to British intelligence agencies, there was evidence that al-Qaeda was making a dirty bomb in Afghanistan in 2003. Fortunately, that "imaginary" bomb was not found.

According to the April 5, 2016 edition of the New York Times, there are "credible" threats of a terrorist attack on nuclear power plants. The authors warned governments that such an attack "would not result in the death of thousands of people but produce considerable radioactive fallout, causing chaos and long-term displacement."

### **Southeast Asia: The Threat from Terrorism and Cooperation on Counter-terrorism**

Due to its failure in Syria and Iraq, the IS is boosting its global presence and searching for new areas to gain ground in Southeast Asia. Some countries, including Indonesia and Singapore, have warned their citizens about potential Jihadist terror attacks, which are only a matter of time. In his National Interest article, Watts said "Indonesia is not only the most populous Muslim nation in the world, but also the most tolerant and harmonious Muslim-majority

in the world. Indonesian people often oppose radical ideas. Therefore, recent attacks aim to radicalise and split Sunni community.” However, it is necessary to pay attention to the coincidence in a series of terror attacks in the region. The “Grey Wolves”, an ultra-nationalist Turkish terrorist group, were believed to have been involved in a bombing in Thailand in August 2015, killing many tourists, most notably Chinese. This attack was part of a broader terror campaign launched by the “Grey Wolves.” It might have been targeted to create tension between Thailand and China, which are enjoying growing economic and military relations.

In the “war on terror” initiated by President George W Bush administration after the event of September 11, 2001, Southeast Asian nations were considered as the second front. The reasons for this may lie in the fact that there are numerous indigenous radical Islamist groups sponsored by al-Qaeda in the region. These groups seek to not only overthrow governments, but target the United States and its allies. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is vulnerable to terrorism because there are Muslim separatist movements among the large Muslim population (accounting for one fourth of the world’s Muslim population). The porous borders and ineffective counter-terrorist measures also worsen the situation.

While compelled to maintain a balanced relationship with major powers, Southeast Asian nations need to be cautious because of anti-American rhetoric in the Muslim community. Some people believe that the US efforts to combat terrorism aim to weaken Islam. Modes of cooperation with the US are based on the cost-benefit analysis of actions of regional countries. However, any Southeast Asian nation facing the threat of terrorism is willing to cooperate with the US. Apart from the US support in the fight against terrorism, regional countries have other geopolitical and geoeconomics dynamics that are to promote economic relations and take advantage of the US to maintain the balance of power in the region.

The US gives priority to cooperation with Indonesia, which concentrates on strengthening counter-terrorism institutions. After the Bali bombing in 2003, the US supported the establishment of Special Detachment 88. It also gives Indonesia USD 40 million to combat terror every year. As for the Philippines, the US assistance to the Philippines’ fight against Abu Sayyaf reached USD 100 million annually. The US and Thailand set up a joint Counter-

terrorism Intelligence Centre and promoted cooperation on military technology as early as 2001. Although the US suspended military aid to Thailand after the 2014 military coup, Thailand still continues to participate in the US-led counter-terrorism programmes. Meanwhile, Malaysia is being accused of double standards in the US-led “war on terror.” On the one hand, it opposes the US to use force in the Middle East and Afghanistan, but on the other hand, it boosts military ties with the US. Malaysia-US cooperation on counter-terrorism has increased considerably in recent years, which include legal support and training. Singapore promotes close cooperation with the US in the field of intelligence exchange. It also makes use of the fight against terrorism to enhance military cooperation with the US and strengthen its national security. Bilateral relations in the fight against terrorism allow the US to promote its military and diplomatic influence in the region. The above mentioned countries in Southeast Asia are given financial assistance and have opportunities to broaden economic and trade relations and build defence capabilities, as well as ability to act.<sup>5</sup>

Although there have not been any major attacks after the Bali terrorist attacks in 2009, the threat of terrorism is growing with IS’s influence. Several regional countries share common views with the US on the threats posed by the IS. However, the US no longer considers Southeast Asia as the second front in its “war on terror” and adjusts cooperation in the direction of supporting moderate Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia, and helping nations to monitor operations of radical groups. Most of the Southeast Asian nations, however, are not willing and have no desire to participate in the US-led alliance against terrorism in any form.

The ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) initiated interagency coordination, including counter-terrorism in 2010. Special forces from 15 ADMM-Plus countries and 3 observers (Japan, Malaysia and Cambodia) carried out force integration training to combat terrorism at Sarimbun Scout Camp, Singapore in May, 2016.

### **Vietnam’s Measures to Prevent and Combat Terrorism**

Prevention and combating terrorism is an enduring and complex struggle, which requires close, comprehensive and prudent leadership, guidance and implementation both in preparation and handling of specific events. In this direction, the responsibility to

prevent and combat terrorism, must rest under the direct and absolute leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the unified management and direction of the State. It is vital to bring into full play the strength of all people, in which the police, in association with the military, forms the core. Prevention is primary; deterrence and addressing the root cause of terrorism are important. Some principal measures are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

Firstly, it is necessary to make organisations, security forces, and common people in the locality aware of the causes, risks, and consequences for national security and social order, posed by terrorism. Besides, it is also necessary to improve leadership, management and effectiveness of the steering committees working on prevention and combating of terrorism at all levels. It is also important to develop and improve plans as well as coordination mechanism between forces involved in prevention and combating of terrorism and take prompt action to improve organisational models and provide equipment for all forces thus ensuring timely and effective response to potential threats.

Secondly, there is a need to conduct training exercises to improve professional skills and combat capabilities of forces engaged in counter-terrorism like the Special Force, Military Engineering, Navy, Air Force etc. to operate in complex environments, terrain and weather. The forces should be able to manoeuvre and respond rapidly to foil terror plots. There should be strict control of entry and exit of persons through land, sea and air borders. Police and military units should coordinate more closely in order to proactively advise party committees and authorities to lead and direct the whole political system and people to prevent, deter, and respond effectively to terrorism right at the grassroots level.

Third, it is vital to actively and proactively boost international cooperation on prevention and combating of terrorism to ensure national interests. Vietnam attaches great importance to cooperation with some international counter-terrorism entities, including INTERPOL, EUROPOL, ASEANPOL, etc., neighbouring countries and other countries which have rich experience and capabilities in combating terrorism in order to facilitate information sharing, training and provision of modern counter-terrorism equipment.

In July 2015, Lao Cai Border Force and Honghe Border Police of Yunnan Province held a joint counter-terrorism exercise, codenamed Red River No.1 2015, on the border. The participating forces were deployed to deal with simulated situations and scenarios effectively.

Vietnam also participated in the international ASEAN-Japan Cyber Exercise the theme of which was "Prevention of extortion attacks to critical information systems of the ASEAN countries and Japan" in May, 2016. More than a 100 leaders dealing with network security and information security of critical organisations of Vietnam participated in this exercise with nine other ASEAN countries and Japan. This exercise was considered as an event of significant importance. In the same year, Vietnam People's Army sent a counter-terrorism unit from its Military Special Force to participate in the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security and Counter-terrorism Exercise 2016 held in Brunei and Singapore under the ADMM-Plus framework. Vietnam's delegation successfully completed all phases of this exercise. The participation proves Vietnam's resolve in finding solutions to global security issues, while improving its prestige in the international arena.

Fourthly, there is a need to address urgent issues within the Vietnamese community, strive for eradication of poverty, improve education and healthcare, build infrastructure and create jobs for the youth with a view to bringing about opportunities and better life for the Vietnamese people. Sustainable development is the best way to prevent and combat terrorism.

Finally, special attention should be paid to the establishment of procedures and mechanisms for close coordination among forces, with an aim to respond effectively in case of a terror attack. Accordingly, if a terror attack took place in a locality, the Party committee and authorities in that area should be responsible for assessing accurately the situation and forecast the forthcoming attacks. This would lay the foundation for working out measures to direct field forces to combat terrorism according to approved standard operating procedures (SOPs). Local departments, industries and unions need to evolve relevant plans and so as to protect their offices, people; and economic, political, cultural, and social infrastructure while coordinating with forces to carry out political, economic, legal, propaganda work, etc., in order to foil terror plots and activities in their area. As far as areas close to



terror scenes are concerned, it is necessary to localise and isolate the terror scene from surrounding areas, provide medical assistance to terror-stricken people, prepare to assist adjacent localities, pursue fleeing terrorists to ensure security and social order; thus, reducing negative impact of terror attacks on other localities.

The Special Forces, Militia and Self-Defence Force must be determined to fight to safeguard vulnerable assets, pursue and destroy terrorists according to operation plans. They should act as vanguards of protecting and evacuating people during a terror attack and closely coordinate with forces on the spot to capture or destroy leaders and deadly terrorist groups, rescue hostages, restore damaged assets and even wipe out the den of terror, if necessary.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past 15 years, terrorism has become extremely vicious and has become a challenge to security of every nation, region and the world as a whole. Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. Therefore, it should have stricter measures to control its society and websites; promote international exchange and cooperation; enhance community building measures; create more jobs; improve people's living standards, education and healthcare; seriously implement the State religion and ethnic policy; and prevent hostile forces from exploiting people to raise money, recruit, or contribute to training for terrorist groups. Units dedicated to prevention and combating of terrorism need to actively practice plans, improve their reaction capability and be determined to fight to safeguard people and vulnerable assets according to well laid out SOPs.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Some countries such as Malaysia, the US etc., have captured those taking part in fundraising activities for the IS.

<sup>2</sup> Bomb attacks at Ritz-Carlton and Marriott hotels in Indonesian capital on July 17, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Terrorist assault at the Bataclan Theater in Paris on November 13, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Terrorist attack in Bangladesh on July 2, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> In the period of 2002-13, US gave 262 and 441 million US dollars for security-related assistance to Indonesia and the Philippines respectively.