

Terrorism in the Indo-Pacific*

The Year Gone By and the Road Ahead

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Globally, terrorism has been on the decline since peaking in 2014, the year that the Islamic State (ISIS) declared its “caliphate” in the Middle East. Nevertheless, terrorism levels are still approximately double what they were a decade ago and around five times what they were in 2001.¹ The Indo-Pacific region, which encompasses most of Asia, as well as North America, Australasia, Oceania, and parts of South America, consistently experiences some of the highest rates of terrorism in the world, and 2019 was no exception.² This article, though by no means an exhaustive account, provides a roughly chronological overview of significant terrorist activities in the Indo-Pacific during the past year, with a particular focus on South and Southeast Asia. This is followed by several important advances in counterterrorism (CT). The article concludes by considering what these, and other developments, may portend for the future.

An Evolving Threat: Significant Developments in 2019

Suicide Bombing in the Philippines

The year began with a deadly, twin suicide bombing of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo in the southern Philippines, in which 23 people lost their lives and scores more were injured. Executed by 35-year-old Rullie Rian Zeke and his 32-year-old wife, Ulfah Handayani Saleh, both from Indonesia, the attack was demonstrative of the enduring potency of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which orchestrated it, as well as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which the two perpetrators had been members of in Indonesia.³ It furthermore underscored the continuing influence of ISIS (with which both ASG and JAD are aligned), the threat of foreign fighters, the heightened popularity of sectarian targets, and the importance of family ties between militants in the region. Also of great concern was the fact that this was the second suicide bombing in the Philippines within the space of six months—a rarity for the archipelagic nation, despite struggling with decades of insurgency and terrorism. Fears that suicide bombing

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is becoming an established tactic in the Philippines were further compounded in June, when the first known Filipino suicide bomber to attack at home (acting together with a foreign accomplice) struck at an army encampment in Indanan, on the island of Sulu, killing five.⁴ Since then, a female suicide bomber blew herself up at a military checkpoint, also in Indanan, and another three intended suicide bombers (two Egyptians and a Filipino) were killed before they could act.⁵

Escalating Tensions between India and Pakistan

In February 2019, attention shifted to South Asia, as archrivals India and Pakistan were yet again thrust into the spotlight following a vehicle-borne suicide bombing of a paramilitary police convoy in Pulwama, Jammu & Kashmir, which killed 40 Indian police personnel. Perpetrated by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), it was described as the worst attack in the restive region in 30 years.⁶ Predictably, it resulted in an immediate escalation of tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, as India reiterated its long-standing accusations that Pakistan was ultimately responsible due to its patronage of JeM and similar groups. In response, India launched airstrikes against an alleged terrorist training camp in Balakot, Pakistan, and the Pakistanis returned fire into Indian territory and briefly took custody of an Indian fighter pilot who they shot down over Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Although relations soon stabilized—the pilot was returned home unharmed and Pakistani authorities arrested 44 suspects believed to be behind the attack—the episode serves as a reminder that terrorism in the region is not only extremely deadly but also has the potential to spark all-out conflict, perhaps even nuclear war.⁷

The Rise of Right-Wing Terrorism

March proved to be yet another landmark month for terrorism in the Indo-Pacific, but this time in a place that no one would have predicted. On 15 March, Brenton Tarrant—a 28-year-old Australian national—shot and killed 51 worshippers at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. Although he seemingly acted alone, the attack is part of a much broader trend of growing right-wing extremism and terrorism that is very much transnational in nature. Attacks of this kind are motivated to varying degrees by white nationalist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, antigovernment and even misogynist beliefs, and although they are typically committed by lone males, the perpetrators are frequently in communication with others who share their twisted worldview. Of particular note is the fact that these individuals are heavily influenced by the actions of others who have gone before them, and in

turn then serve as inspiration for future terrorists.⁸ This is especially the case when attackers leave behind manifestos offering justification for their deeds, and in Tarrant's case this was further magnified by the fact that he live-streamed his attack.⁹ The following month, 19-year-old John Earnest attempted to emulate Tarrant as he opened fire on the congregation of the Chabad of Poway synagogue in California, killing one, though fortunately the live-feed failed and his weapon apparently jammed, thus preventing more casualties.¹⁰ The United States would suffer a similar attack in August when Patrick Crusius—who was targeting Mexican immigrants—shot and killed 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. Both Earnest and Crusius cited Tarrant, among others, as a source of inspiration.¹¹

Islamist Terrorism Comes to Sri Lanka

While the world was still reeling from the attack in New Zealand, Salafijihadist terrorists again stole the limelight with multiple, coordinated suicide bombings on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, which claimed the lives of more than 250 people. Though no stranger to terrorism, this was the first major Islamist-motivated terrorist attack in the country. Until that point, the groups held to be responsible (little-known, local outfit National Thowheed Jamath and the even more obscure Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim) had done little more than vandalize Buddhist temples.¹² Such a quantum leap in capability would seem to suggest some form of external support, and so it came as little surprise when ISIS claimed responsibility for the atrocities just two days later (despite the fact that Sri Lanka was not a part of the anti-ISIS coalition).



Figure 1. A Sri Lankan security officer stands guard in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter attacks

Nevertheless, the precise nature of ISIS's involvement appears to be as yet unknown. The claim of responsibility was accompanied by a video of the attackers

pledging allegiance to (then) ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which is demonstrative of at least some form of online connection. Shortly afterward, it was reported by the *Wall Street Journal* that one of the attackers, 37-year-old aeronautical engineering graduate Jameel Mohammed Abdul Latheef, had spent up to six months in Syria before being sent home to conduct attacks.¹³ But these allegations have yet to be clearly substantiated, and Sri Lankan police announced in July that thus far there was insufficient evidence to show that ISIS had a direct hand in the attacks.¹⁴ If indeed this holds true, it must surely be the most deadly example of ISIS-inspired (vs. directed) terrorism to date. What is known for sure is that—contrary to popular stereotypes—the perpetrators were well-educated young men from affluent families, who had plenty of other opportunities in life.

ISIS in Asia

Whether or not ISIS played a substantive role in the bombings in Sri Lanka, the attacks—which took place less than a month after the terrorist group lost its last sliver of territory in Syria—no doubt sharpened its focus on South Asia. Hot on the heels of what for ISIS was a badly-needed success, in May the group announced a reorganization of its operations in the region, creating the new “provinces” of Wilayah Pakistan and Wilayah Hind to deal with Pakistan and the rest of the Indian subcontinent respectively, thereby leaving ISIS Khorasan to focus on its base of operations in Afghanistan.¹⁵ To date, the practical consequences of this move have yet to materialize, and in that sense, it appears to have been largely symbolic—an effort to project beyond the organization’s real, physical presence in an effort to reestablish itself following the destruction of the caliphate and to cultivate more localized recruitment. Even so, such developments should not be dismissed. More recently, it was reported that ISIS was believed to have selected and trained inaugural leaders for India, Kashmir, and Pakistan, thereby seeking to translate words into something far more tangible.¹⁶

Of course, since then ISIS has suffered further setbacks, including the death of al-Baghdadi in October, and—perhaps of greater significance to the Indo-Pacific—the loss of Nangarhar Province, its core of operations in Afghanistan, in November.¹⁷ Although tactical victories such as these are important milestones in the fight against terrorism, it is not apparent that the Salafi-jihadist threat to the Indo-Pacific has drastically altered in the immediate aftermath. Indeed, ISIS affiliates from throughout the region—including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia—were quick to record new pledges of allegiance to al-Baghdadi’s replacement, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, despite him being relatively unknown, even within jihadist circles.¹⁸ This is particularly notable for the ISIS supporters in Southeast Asia, who had been side-

lined by al-Baghdadi in April after he neglected to mention the terror organization's East Asia province.¹⁹ More importantly, jihadist terrorists from throughout the region have a long track record of resiliency in the face of adversity, often predating ISIS by many years, and are unlikely to be dissuaded from their chosen course of action. Within two months of al-Baghdadi's death, there was a suicide bombing in Indonesia, at least three explosives attacks in the Philippines, and multiple ISIS-related raids and arrests in Indonesia, the Philippines, India, and Pakistan.²⁰ It is only a matter of time before terrorists inspired by—if not directly connected to—ISIS strike again within the region.

The Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting

Although there are so far no reports of connections to ISIS, as 2019 was coming to an end, jihadist terrorism again reared its ugly head in the Indo-Pacific, this time in the United States. Early in the morning of 8 December, 21-year-old Mohammed Alshamrani—a second lieutenant in the Saudi Air Force who was attending an aviation training program at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida—opened fire in a classroom on base, killing three American Sailors and injuring several others, before he was shot dead by local law enforcement.²¹ During the attack, Alshamrani fired approximately 180 rounds, using a legally purchased handgun, and made statements critical of US military actions overseas.²² Shortly after the attack, investigators found a Twitter account, believed to belong to the shooter, featuring anti-American and anti-Israeli postings, as well as quotes from al-Qaeda figures Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki.²³ Attorney General William P. Barr subsequently reported that the incident had been confirmed as an act of terrorism “motivated by jihadist ideology.”²⁴ At the time of writing, however, it is not known whether Alshamrani was inspired by any specific group, and he is thus far believed to have been acting alone.²⁵

Notwithstanding the fact that there is much we still do not know, the Pensacola shooting is notable for several reasons. To begin with, it is one of the most significant cases of foreign infiltration of the United States for purposes of terrorism since 9/11, particularly as it involved a member of the Saudi armed forces. As a result, it raised important questions about vetting of foreign military personnel attending courses in the United States (including as it relates to social media), which caused the Pentagon to develop new security protocols in response.²⁶ At the same time, it once again raised the thorny issues of gun control, and the “Apple vs. FBI” debate, which came up after the FBI reported that it was unable to access the contents of Alshamrani's smartphones.²⁷ The repercussions of this attack will, therefore, be felt well into 2020 and beyond.

India's Extreme Left

Besides violent jihadists—who understandably tend to dominate discussions of terrorism, given their transnational reach and frequent, mass-casualty attacks—the Indo-Pacific continued to face a variety of other terrorism threats in 2019. A large part of the reason why India ranks so highly in the list of countries suffering from terrorism (coming in third place in number of attacks worldwide in 2018) is because of the actions of extreme left-wing terrorists, known as the Naxalites.²⁸ Although far less deadly than their jihadist counterparts, they are much more active, conducting almost twice as many attacks as all jihadist groups combined in 2018 (the most recent year that we currently have data for).²⁹ During the past year, the Naxalites continued to face setbacks, thanks to a combination of internal organizational fault lines and an increasingly effective counterinsurgency campaign.³⁰ Nevertheless, they were still active in as many as 90 districts spread across 11 states,³¹ and they retained lethal capabilities, including the killing of 15 police officers and their driver in a landmine attack in Maharashtra in May 2019.³² For India, combatting the Naxalites thus remains a high priority in the fight against terrorism, even as the insurgency continues to weaken.

The New People's Army in the Philippines

Also representing the extreme left, the most active group in the Philippines—heavily contributing to the fact that it ranked fifth in number of terrorist attacks in 2018—is the Communist New People's Army (NPA).³³ In 2019, the group's 50th year of insurgency, the NPA continued to extort the civilian population and conduct attacks against Philippine security forces. Major attacks included an ambush on troops on Samar Island in April that resulted in a prolonged firefight in which six soldiers were killed,³⁴ and a similar incident, again in Samar, in which another six soldiers lost their lives and 20 more were wounded in November, after the terrorists detonated multiple improvised explosive devices and proceeded to open fire with automatic weapons.³⁵ Most recently, a holiday ceasefire broke down in late December after the NPA carried out attacks in Iloilo, Quezon, and Camarines Norte, placing future peace talks in jeopardy.³⁶

Thailand's Southern Insurgency

Elsewhere, separatist insurgencies continue to smolder with varying degrees of intensity. In Thailand's Muslim-majority deep south, attempts at formal negotiations between the government and militants have been stalled since April 2018, and although violence has been at the lowest levels since 2004, tensions flared following the death of an insurgent suspect in army custody in August 2019.³⁷

While it is unclear whether this was the driving factor, November saw the bloodiest attack in the region since 2001, when gunmen killed 15 people, including village defense volunteers, at a security checkpoint in Yala.³⁸ In contrast to this, a glimmer of hope emerged in January 2020, when a delegation from the largest rebel group in the south, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional, met with representatives from Bangkok in what was the first official bilateral meeting between the two since 2013.³⁹ Although this is certainly a welcome development, for the time being, the outlook for a peaceful political settlement in southern Thailand remains bleak.

Ethnonationalists in Northeast India

By comparison, separatist violence in India's northeast appeared to take a slightly more positive turn in 2019. Insurgency-related incidents had already declined by as much as 66 percent from 2013 to 2018,⁴⁰ and although deadly attacks and related criminality continued last year (including the murder of a local member of parliament in Arunachal Pradesh in May⁴¹), a "historical breakthrough" was achieved in October when negotiators overcame a long-standing deadlock between the central government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN [IM]).

Multilateral peace talks had been on the verge of falling through due to the latter's insistence on demands for the establishment of Greater Nagaland and a separate constitution. But once the NSCN (IM) agreed to place these conditions on hold in return for being allowed to fly a separate state flag, it brought them in line with the other seven insurgent organizations involved in the talks (collectively known as the Naga National Political Groups), thus paving the way for further potential progress.⁴² Tempering this optimism, the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December, which grants citizenship to non-Muslim persecuted religious minorities from neighboring countries, was met with widespread protests throughout the northeast, where it is believed it will increase migration to the region and is thus viewed as a threat to indigenous identities and way of life.⁴³ Ethnonationalist sentiment and distrust in central government were similarly stirred in relation to developments in Kashmir (more on this below) and are likely to complicate peace talks with insurgent groups in the region, if not result in further violence.

Balochistan

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the Baloch separatist insurgency continued to simmer, despite the surrender of hundreds of militants in recent years under an amnesty program that continues to have success.⁴⁴ According to the Pak Institute for Peace

Studies, Baloch nationalists conducted 51 attacks in Balochistan in 2019, killing 71 people and wounding 162 others (compared to 80 attacks the previous year, which killed 96).⁴⁵ Notable operations included the murder of 14 military personnel near the town of Ormara on Pakistan's south coast in April, which was claimed by the Baloch Raji Ajohi Sangar (the Baloch National Freedom Movement or BRAS)—a coalition of previously disparate separatist groups that came together in November 2018.⁴⁶ The following month, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which is part of the BRAS alliance, launched a 20-hour assault on the luxury Pearl Continental Hotel, killing five. Afterward, the BLA issued a warning to China to halt its “exploitative projects in Balochistan” or risk further attacks⁴⁷—a direct reference to the multibillion dollar China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has only added to the grievances of the people of Balochistan since it was first established in 2015.⁴⁸ When the activities of violent jihadist and sectarian groups are also taken into account, Balochistan remains one of the regions most affected by terrorism in Pakistan, and in 2019 it saw the greatest number of casualties anywhere in the country.⁴⁹ Balochistan's increasingly prominent position in a complex geostrategic landscape suggests, that despite gradual progress being made, it will be a focal point for terrorism and CT in the months and years to come.⁵⁰

Separatist Insurgency in Myanmar

Further east, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has run up against yet more ethnonationalist insurgency, this time in the form of various ethnic rebel groups in Myanmar that threaten the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), agreed to in July 2018. During the past year, international attention has remained focused on the plight of the Rohingya, many of whom now live as refugees in neighboring Bangladesh, after being driven from their homes in western Rakhine state. However, much of the recent violence in Rakhine has centered on the activities of the Arakan Army (AA), which is fighting for independence from the central government but has openly condemned the Rohingya using similar, hardline rhetoric.⁵¹ In 2019, the AA intensified its operations, beginning with an attack on border posts in January that left 13 police dead. Several hundred from both sides have been killed since, and many more civilians displaced.⁵² In August, the AA was involved in “one of the most audacious insurgent operations [in Myanmar] in recent years,” this time in Shan state to the east, which shares a border with China.⁵³ Operating under the banner of the Northern Alliance and working together with the Palaung Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the ethnic Chinese Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, they overran highway security checkpoints, blew up four major bridges, and fired rockets at the

Defense Services Technical Academy, which has been referred to as Myanmar's West Point.⁵⁴ At least 16 people were reportedly killed in these attacks, and two border gates with China were temporarily closed, prompting much discussion of the longer-term implications for the CMEC.⁵⁵ Fears of terrorism continued to rise in the country in September when the US embassy in Yangon reportedly issued a warning that insurgents—believed to include members of the Karen National Union, the Chin National Front, and the Northern Alliance—were planning attacks in the capital city of Naypyidaw.⁵⁶ Although fortunately, the attacks did not materialize, the incident serves to highlight the level of concern over insurgency and terrorism in the country.

Counterterrorism

Declining Terrorist Attacks

Despite many challenges, terrorists in the Indo-Pacific region have not simply had their own way, and 2019 also bore witness to significant progress in terms of CT. As noted at the start of this article, global terrorist attacks have been on the decline now for several years, and this trend evidently continued in 2019. Nowhere was this more impressive than in Pakistan, which—withstanding continued frustration over its ongoing support for JeM and other externally-focused groups—has seen a dramatic reduction in the number of attacks inside the country as a result of sustained, military-led CT operations and a National Action Plan against terrorism that was launched in 2015. Pakistani think tanks reported further reductions in terrorism in 2019, ranging from 13 to 31 percent.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, international pressure also continued to build on Pakistan to end its selective approach to CT and clamp down on those individuals and organizations it is accused of supporting. Already on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) “grey list” for failing to implement satisfactory counterterrorist financing and anti-money-laundering measures, Islamabad had until October 2019 to complete a plan of action to bring Pakistan in line with international standards.⁵⁸ Although this was extended until June 2020, the government will have to demonstrate meaningful progress to avoid being placed on the “blacklist,” which carries serious economic implications.⁵⁹ The July 2019 arrest and subsequent indictment of Hafiz Saeed—the founder of Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) and alleged mastermind of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008—on charges of terrorism financing is some indication that this pressure is having an effect.⁶⁰ In this environment, Pakistan's stance toward JeM will also be tested, especially since the leader of that organization, Masood Azhar, was finally sanctioned by the UN Security Council

in May, after years of Chinese opposition to the move finally broke down in the aftermath of the attack in Pulwama.⁶¹

Elsewhere in the region, terrorists were also on the back foot. In addition to the decline in violence in India and Thailand (see above), Indonesia, too, saw a drop in the number of attacks in 2019, from 15 the previous year down to eight.⁶² Bangladesh was also relatively successful in limiting the activities of terrorists in the country for the third year in a row since the Holey Artisan Café attack of 2016, though it experienced a small number of low-level attacks against police.⁶³ Authorities in Singapore and Malaysia meanwhile maintained an even tighter grip on security, making numerous raids and arrests to extend their successful records against terrorists operating within their respective borders. Malaysia, in particular, has been relentless, having arrested more than 500 ISIS suspects and thwarted 25 terrorist attack plots since 2013.⁶⁴

The Elimination of Terrorist Leaders

Against this backdrop of continual law enforcement operations, the year was also punctuated by the death of several high-profile militants from the region. This included the killing of “the main Malaysian recruiters” for ISIS, Mohd Rafi Udin and Wan Mohd Aquil Wan Zainal Abidin in Russian airstrikes in Baghouz, Syria, in January and March.⁶⁵ Also in March, the Philippine military eliminated “the last surviving leader” of the ISIS-affiliated Maute Group, Benito Marohomb-sar, aka Abu Dar.⁶⁶ In November, they killed Talha Jumsah (aka Abu Talha), an ISIS-trained bomb maker who was instrumental in helping the ASG carry out suicide bombings and served as a “finance conduit and liaison” between foreign and local jihadists.⁶⁷ Indian CT forces likewise recorded numerous successes in 2019, beginning with the killing of Zakir Musa, the leader of Ansar Ghazwat ul-Hind, an al-Qaeda-linked militant organization operating in Kashmir in May.⁶⁸ The following month they killed the group’s spokesman, Shabir Ahmad Malik, and in October they dispatched with Musa’s replacement, Hamid Lel-hari.⁶⁹ This came hot on the heels of the death of Asim Umar, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in a joint US–Afghan military raid in Helmand province in Afghanistan, further adding to al-Qaeda’s woes in South Asia.⁷⁰ While kinetic operations alone are unlikely to result in lasting strategic victory, they are nevertheless an essential component of CT that help demoralize the enemy and disrupt their operations.

“Soft” Counterterrorism

On the nonkinetic side of things, there has also been progress. Numerous countries in the region, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, and Australia, have been operating a variety of “deradicalization” and rehabilitation programs for several years, which they continue to refine, and others are now getting on board. In June, for example, it was reported that 21 counseling centers had been established in India’s southern state of Kerala—which has seen the greatest concentration of ISIS supporters in the country—and some 3,000 people had already been deradicalized.⁷¹ Although there are too few details to know exactly what to make of this, it is an indication of growing awareness of the need for more comprehensive approaches to CT. Another example of this comes from the Philippines, where the Anti-Terrorism Council approved a new National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (NAP PCVE) in July 2019.⁷² Among other lines of effort, this will involve collaboration between the government and religious leaders to address youth radicalization and the establishment of deradicalization programs within prisons.⁷³ It is also a timely development for the Philippines, as the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) entered into a new phase in February 2019, with the formal establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in the south of the country, following a plebiscite to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in January.⁷⁴ This was no doubt a historic development, representing more than 20 years of negotiation with the MILF.⁷⁵ However, the process of disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating some 40,000 fighters (scheduled to last until 2022) will be extremely challenging, and there is always the possibility that some will return to violence.⁷⁶ On top of this, the Muslim-majority south is still plagued by an assortment of terrorist groups, which remain adamantly opposed to the peace process, including the ASG, the Maute Group, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. While the future role of the NAP PCVE in Mindanao is currently unclear, it is there that it will be most needed.

International Cooperation

Besides the efforts of individual nation-states, it is essential that countries work together in the fight against terrorism. Here, too, there were signs of progress. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been conducting coordinated maritime and air patrols together in the Sulu and Celebes Seas through the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement, which began in 2017, largely as a response to the activities of ASG. In July 2019, this was expanded to incorporate a trilateral land-based exercise between the three countries, in the first step toward

developing a ground component to the agreement.⁷⁷ Although there is evidently still much to be done, it is nevertheless a clear sign of progress that may yet pay dividends in the fight against cross-border terrorism and crime. The same three countries have also been working together as part of an Interpol Integrated Border Management Task Force program called Project Riptide, which entails a combination of training courses and on-the-ground operations at border points aimed at enhancing the detection of foreign fighters and criminals.⁷⁸ Between April 2017 and February 2019, more than 800 officers had received training and details of 448 wanted persons—including 105 foreign fighters—were added to Interpol databases.⁷⁹ Interpol provided an additional boost to CT in the region with the establishment of a new Regional Counter-Terrorism Node in Singapore, which was announced in July.⁸⁰

Though the dynamic in South Asia is rather different, there has been a shift toward closer cooperation in matters of CT there too, particularly after the bombings in Sri Lanka, which served to highlight ongoing deficiencies. The good news was that, prior to the attacks, India had passed on detailed intelligence to their Sri Lankan counterparts on three separate occasions that, had it been acted upon, could have potentially prevented the attacks.⁸¹ Unfortunately, amid alleged interpersonal rivalries within the Sri Lankan political and security establishment, this did not take place.⁸² While this speaks primarily to lapses in internal interagency cooperation within Sri Lanka that will need to be addressed by the newly elected Rajapaksa government as a matter of urgency, it also led to the realization that countries in the region need to work more closely with each another. To this end, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi vowed to step up CT cooperation with Sri Lanka on a bilateral basis, following his reelection in May, which he then backed up with a 50 million USD line of credit in November.⁸³

More significantly, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, India renewed its efforts within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to ensure that the Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking—which had been stalled for a decade—will finally come into force.⁸⁴ New Delhi is using the same platform to push for the early signing of the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters between BIMSTEC member states, which include India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Thailand.⁸⁵

The need for stronger cooperation on matters of CT received a further diplomatic boost in November at the 14th meeting of the East Asia Summit (EAS), which includes all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as India, Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, Australia, New

Zealand, Russia, and the United States.⁸⁶ Among other issues, the EAS highlighted the need to work more closely with the FATF and similar regional bodies to counter terrorist financing, as well as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which provides assistance in developing legislation, enhancing knowledge and skills needed for investigations and prosecutions, and improving international cooperation.⁸⁷ Such declarations assist in highlighting important issues and generating political will but, of course, must also be acted upon if they are going to have any impact. Another limitation is that neither the EAS nor BIMSTEC includes Pakistan. Indeed, part of the reason India is working through the BIMSTEC is due to frustration at the continued ineffectiveness of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), for which the India–Pakistan rivalry has proven an insurmountable obstacle. Although there were no signs of this changing in 2019, it is worth noting that, together with the other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), India and Pakistan took part in a large-scale military exercise with the theme of countering international terrorism in Russia in September.⁸⁸

Yet more effort to enhance international CT cooperation was made in 2019, this time in the realm of cyberspace. At the forefront of these endeavors was New Zealand. Spurred on by the fact that Facebook and other social media companies ultimately failed to prevent the online spread of footage from the attack in Christchurch before it went viral, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern spearheaded a global initiative to generate stronger commitment to “eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online” and to build closer cooperation between governments and tech companies. Although it is nonbinding in nature, the “Christchurch Call” includes a series of commitments or guidelines for governments and the tech sector that serve to highlight various lines of effort that need to be pursued with greater vigor. Examples include strategies to develop processes allowing governments and online service providers to rapidly respond to the spread of terrorist content online, to ensure appropriate cooperation with and among law enforcement agencies, and to partner with civil society to promote community-led efforts to counter violent extremism through things like countermessaging.⁸⁹ Among the 18 founding members of this initiative, when it was first signed in May, were New Zealand, Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, and Japan. Another 31 signatories came on board in September, including the Maldives, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Chile.⁹⁰ Although each country is responsible for devising its own laws, regulations, and procedures in translating the Christchurch Call into action, at the very least the initiative has raised further awareness of the need to take more decisive action against terrorists in cyberspace, which is a net positive for the region and beyond.

The Road Ahead

Rising Hindu Nationalism in India

As we look to the future, there are a number of controversial issues in the Indo-Pacific that continue to draw international attention and that terrorists, both in and outside of the region, may seek to exploit to their advantage. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the associated Hindutva policies of Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India is one such issue. For several years now, this development has created an environment in which Hindu extremists are becoming increasingly emboldened, and from 2014 to mid-2019, there were 276 religious bias-driven hate crimes in India, including lynchings of Muslims suspected of slaughtering cows and eating beef.⁹¹ In 2019, there were two particularly inflammatory developments, which yet have the potential to foment radicalization and acts of retaliatory terrorism. The first was the August revocation of Article 370, which had allowed Kashmir significant autonomy from the central government, and the subsequent division of the region into two federally administered states (Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh). Predicated on the need to further integrate the troubled region with the rest of India and to boost its economic development, critics point out that the revocation paves the way for what they see as deliberate alteration of the Muslim-majority region's ethnic and religious composition, as it allows people from the rest of the country to settle there.⁹² In anticipation of potentially violent protests, tens of thousands of Indian troops were bused into the already highly militarized area ahead of the announcement, after which Jammu & Kashmir was placed on lockdown. This entailed curfews; blackouts of media, social media, and communications; as well as mass arrests, including the house arrest of hundreds of local politicians.⁹³

These added security measures appear to have so far largely contained terrorist activity in the region. However, they cannot continue in perpetuity and are likely to generate widespread bitterness and anger. Sporadic outbreaks of violence (including a grenade attack on security personnel in Srinagar in October) are indicative of this simmering resentment.⁹⁴ Indian security officials have also repeatedly warned that several hundred terrorists are thought to be stationed in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, waiting for the opportunity to infiltrate.⁹⁵ Although these claims cannot be verified, there is little doubt that groups such as JeM and LeT will view the revocation of Article 370 as an act of aggression, will be eager to exact revenge, and may see an uptick in recruitment. Jihadist organizations in general, including those with few real connections to the region, may also seek to capitalize on India's actions by framing them as part of the perceived, global "war on Islam."⁹⁶ Meanwhile, the Pakistani government has condemned the move as illegal and

vowed to “exercise all possible options.”⁹⁷ On top of all this— as noted above— there are implications for India’s northeast. People there now fear that their own special status, provided for under Article 371, is now also in jeopardy, meaning they will need to be reassured if peace talks are to going to continue to progress.⁹⁸

The second important development in India was the aforementioned enactment of the CAA in December, which granted a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim “persecuted minorities” from neighboring Muslim states. While people in the northeast protested because it is viewed as a threat to their ethnic integrity, people throughout the rest of the country protested because it is seen as a threat to the secular constitution and as a deliberate move to further marginalize India’s sizable Muslim minority population.⁹⁹ When viewed together with the abrogation of Article 370 and against the backdrop of increasingly strident Hindu nationalism and acts of violent extremism, of which Muslims have been the primary victims, it is possible that together these conditions will create fertile ground for radicalization, which violent jihadists could exploit. To date, India’s Muslim population has been remarkably resistant to Salafi-jihadist messaging, with relatively few becoming involved with groups like ISIS or al-Qaeda. If that were to change, in a worst case scenario, India could experience intercommunal violence on a massive scale, with serious implications for regional stability.

China’s Actions in Xinjiang

Other issues in the Indo-Pacific, which terrorists may seize upon and are worthy of close attention, include China’s treatment of its Muslim (mainly Uyghur) population in Xinjiang and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been subject to increasing securitization, characterized by extensive surveillance measures, since the related flare-up of political violence and acts of terrorism in the country from 2009–2014.¹⁰⁰ During this period there were numerous mass stabbings and multiple suicide bombings, including an incident in Luntai in which 50 people (consisting of 40 “rioters,” six civilians, and four police officers) were killed.¹⁰¹ However, China’s approach to security in Xinjiang began to attract much greater attention only after it resorted to mass internment and “reeducation” of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities, coupled with efforts to monitor and control the Uyghur diaspora population, beginning in 2017.¹⁰²

Justified by China as necessary steps to counter the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the internment camps (referred to by the Chinese Community Party [CCP] as Vocational Education and Training Centers) have been widely criticized on human rights grounds since they became public knowledge.¹⁰³ The debate intensified in July 2019 when 22 countries, including the

United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, issued a joint statement at the UN condemning China's policies.¹⁰⁴ In reply, 37 countries, including Pakistan, the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and North Korea issued a letter of support for China.¹⁰⁵ The controversy then further escalated in November when several official CCP documents, containing details of repressive measures employed in the camps, were leaked to the international press.¹⁰⁶

As the drama has unfolded, terrorists have also been watching. Uyghur militants have long-established, deep operational ties to al-Qaeda and the Taliban dating back to at least the early 2000s, and the groups have long expressed solidarity for the Uyghurs' cause.¹⁰⁷ For example, in October 2009, following deadly riots in the Xinjiang regional capital of Urumqi, Abu Yahya al-Libi, then a prominent member of the al-Qaeda leadership, condemned China's "decades of oppression . . . organized cleansing and . . . systematic repression" of the Muslim population, and called on Uyghurs to prepare for Holy War.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, in 2016, al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri railed against China as an "atheist occupier," and in April 2019, al-Qaeda's general command issued a statement in support of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)—which is the primary Uyghur terrorist organization currently operating in Afghanistan and Syria—and called on Muslims to support their cause.¹⁰⁹ ISIS has likewise urged "revenge" against China for Beijing's policies in Xinjiang, and in March 2017 released a video featuring Uyghur members of the group who vowed to return home and "shed blood like rivers."¹¹⁰ As these examples allude to, Uyghur extremists enjoy the support of transnational jihadist groups, thanks largely to the fact that they continue to fight alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS on the battlefield.¹¹¹ Precise numbers are elusive, but it is believed that around 300 Uyghurs joined ISIS in Syria, while many times that number fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, and later Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.¹¹² Some estimates suggest the total number of Chinese foreign fighters in Syria (mostly Uyghurs but also including some Han Chinese) to be as many as 5,000.¹¹³

In light of these developments, China is understandably apprehensive that Uyghur terrorists, or their allies, may seek to launch attacks in Xinjiang, elsewhere in China, or against Chinese interests overseas. As noted above, some Uyghurs currently fighting in Syria would like to return home to conduct attacks. This is also in line with remarks made by the leader of the TIP, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani.¹¹⁴ However, not all Uyghur foreign fighters necessarily share these aims, and given the intensity of China's security crackdown, the chances of infiltrating Xinjiang and conducting terrorist activities without being detected are relatively low. An alternative possibility, which might present a more viable option, would be for jihadist veterans of the Syrian war to travel either to Afghanistan or to neighboring countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or

Tajikistan) and launch attacks from there.¹¹⁵ Uyghur militants are also known to have established ties with jihadist counterparts in Southeast Asia, which was the primary transit route on the way to Turkey and Syria. This has been particularly evident so far in Indonesia, where several Uyghurs have been arrested or killed in CT operations in recent years.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Uyghurs have already demonstrated the intent and capability to conduct attacks outside of China. Notable examples include the August 2015 bombing of the Erawan shrine in Bangkok, in which 20 people were killed in apparent retaliation for Thailand's forcible repatriation of Uyghurs to China, and the August 2016 suicide bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which was ordered by Uyghur militants active in Syria and carried out by a member of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.¹¹⁷ Regardless of how the threat eventually manifests itself, China's policies in Xinjiang have undoubtedly enflamed jihadist sensibilities.

This, in addition to BRI projects (discussed above), places China and its interests in the region at heightened risk of attack.¹¹⁸ It may also lead to closer cooperation between China and other countries in matters of CT. While there are some advantages to this, there is also a danger that this will increase China's political leverage, and that, over time, surveillance-heavy, repressive measures will proliferate in the region, which could potentially increase the risk of terrorism in response.

The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

Finally, there is the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. Currently, there are around one million Rohingya living in Bangladesh, having fled the appalling violence in Rakhine state in western Myanmar.¹¹⁹ The immediate terrorist threat related to this comes in the form of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), whose actions first sparked the current crisis in August 2017 when they attacked more than 30 police posts, killing 12 members of the Burmese security forces, which then responded with indiscriminate violence on a massive scale.¹²⁰ Since then, the ARSA has remained active, but its operations are sporadic (including just two reported incidents in Myanmar in 2019), and the organization does not appear to have advanced beyond a relatively low level of capability.¹²¹

However, as the Rohingya continue to suffer in deplorable conditions, there is concern they will become increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists over time. During the past year, several reports have indicated that militants are active in Cox's Bazar, the main refugee camp for Rohingyas in Bangladesh, and the ARSA has been blamed for numerous killings and other atrocities directed against people it regards as traitors or informants.¹²² Women who are deemed not to be dressed moderately enough have also been targeted.¹²³ Accord-

ing to a self-professed member of the group, interviewed by journalists reporting for the German newspaper *Deutsche Welle*, there are as many as 3,500 members of the ARSA living in Bangladeshi refugee camps, and several hundred have snuck across the border to Myanmar to receive military training.¹²⁴ The same individual admitted threatening women who work for aid agencies because “Muslim religion doesn’t support it,” and said that he had been instructed to hit women who were not sufficiently covered.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, Rohingya children living in the camps, deprived of proper education, are being taught in madrassas, some of which are run by “hardline” Islamists with histories of violent activism.¹²⁶

While the plight of the refugees drags on, there is the added fear that Rohingya militants may develop operational connections with transnational terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda, which could lead to a significant escalation in conflict. These concerns are founded upon reports such as that the leader of the ARSA, Ata Ullah, and other senior members of the group, were given training by Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan.¹²⁷ There have also been unsubstantiated allegations of links to LeT.¹²⁸ Additionally, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups have expressed solidarity with the Rohingya and encouraged violent jihad against the government of Myanmar.¹²⁹ For its part, the ARSA has stringently denied any form of connection and, although this cannot simply be taken at face value, there is presently no evidence to prove otherwise.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, a number of seemingly isolated cases have come to light in recent years, including a 2013 plot to bomb the Burmese embassy in Indonesia;¹³¹ the 2016 arrest of an Indonesian extremist in Malaysia, who was allegedly heading to Myanmar;¹³² the 2017 arrest of a British–Bangladeshi in New Delhi, who had reportedly been tasked by al-Qaeda with recruiting Rohingya refugees in north-east India;¹³³ and the May 2019 arrest of an ISIS cell in Malaysia, including two Rohingya, who were plotting attacks on multiple targets, including the Burmese embassy in Kuala Lumpur.¹³⁴ Thus, although the Rohingya issue so far has been largely symbolic for transnational jihadists, some may yet succeed in infiltrating Myanmar and/or Bangladesh, which—as we saw in the Philippines, for example—could result in tactical innovations such as suicide bombing. We might also yet see recruitment of Rohingya to jihadist organizations in meaningful numbers and potential attacks on Burmese targets outside of Myanmar. For the time being, these are possibilities rather than probabilities. Whether or not they materialize is partly dependent on how Myanmar and Bangladesh handle the situation going forward and whether there are renewed flare-ups in violence that serve to refocus international attention on the region.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

As this discussion shows, the future of terrorism in the Indo-Pacific—though by no means clear—is likely to be shaped, at least in part, by the unfolding of various highly charged, political and social issues that transcend national boundaries and provide terrorists with opportunities they can exploit. Of course, there are myriad factors specific to individual countries that will shape the threat as well—not least being their CT strategies and how they are implemented. Importantly, the evolution of the threat is also dependent on events outside of the region. The rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq had an invigorating effect on jihadist terrorists throughout the world. Now that the group has been militarily defeated (at least for the time being), some of the wind appears to have been taken from their sails. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the above discussion of Uyghur militants, an immediate concern for the region is the return of their citizens (foreign fighters and their families), some of whom are still at large, while others are currently languishing in Kurdish detention camps in northern Syria. For the most part, the numbers and identities of these individuals appear to be unknown, but it is believed that several hundred Indonesians, 80 Australians, 65 Malaysians, and around 32 Canadians are still in Kurdish custody.¹³⁵

Although most of these individuals are women and children, the worry is that returnees from Syria will conduct attacks and/or spread Salafi-jihadist ideas. So far, these fears have been confirmed in at least three cases. In April 2015, Malaysian police arrested a returnee named Murad Halimmuddin Hassan, who along with his son, was later convicted of plotting to kidnap government officials and conduct attacks targeting the police and military.¹³⁶ In Bangladesh, the mastermind of the aforementioned Holey Artisan Café attack in July 2016 was a Bangladeshi–Canadian named Tamim Chowdhury. Having radicalized in Canada, he had joined ISIS in Syria before being sent to oversee the group’s operations in his country of birth.¹³⁷ In July 2017, another veteran of the war in Syria named Syawaludin Pakpahan, together with an accomplice he had recruited, stabbed a police officer to death in Indonesia.¹³⁸

Because of such occurrences, governments have been understandably reluctant to bring their citizens back. However, following the Turkish incursion into Kurdish occupied Syria in October 2019, there is an added sense of urgency to ensure that detainees are accounted for and repatriated before they can escape or are potentially set free. Those foreign fighters who are still at large might relocate elsewhere, but ultimately, it seems inevitable that those who are detained will have to return home. When that eventually takes place, judicial systems and re-

integration programs, such as already exist in places like Indonesia and Malaysia, will be tested.

Attacks involving returnees are likely to remain rare but, of course, cannot be ruled out. Far more likely, and in many ways more difficult to prevent, will be continued efforts by returnees to spread their twisted beliefs, which is likely to occur both in and outside of prison. The effects of this may be felt for many years to come.

A closely related concern is that, with the Middle East now a much less viable prospect for terrorist activities, parts of the Indo-Pacific may emerge as attractive destinations for foreign fighters, both from within the region and elsewhere. In the Philippines, this is already the case. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had encouraged Muslims to support the jihadist struggle in Mindanao as early as 2015, and ISIS stepped up its recruitment efforts for the region the following year.¹³⁹ After the siege of Marawi ended in October 2017, the Philippine military reportedly identified 32 foreigners among the tally of terrorists they had killed, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, but also thought to include some from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Chechnya.¹⁴⁰ Since then, there have been reports of foreign terrorist suspects making their way to the Philippines from as far afield as Egypt and Spain, and in November 2018, a high-ranking intelligence officer was quoted as saying there were “about 40” foreign fighters still in the country.¹⁴¹ Moreover, as noted at the beginning of this article, foreign militants have been instrumental in orchestrating the recent rise in suicide bombing in the Philippines, beginning with an attack by a German–Moroccan man at a security checkpoint in southern Basilan in July 2018.¹⁴²

Another prospective destination for foreign fighters in the region could be Pakistan, where numerous jihadists traveled to after 9/11 but before the conflict in Syria. More recently, there have been signs that it is again attracting this sort of attention, as reflected in arrests made by US authorities in New York in February and July of 2019. The first of these cases involved 29-year-old Jesus Wilfredo Encarnacion, who was planning to join LeT, while the second involved 33-year-old Delowar Mohammed Hossain, who ultimately intended to join the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹⁴³ As discussed above, Myanmar and Bangladesh could also potentially attract jihadist travelers because of the Rohingya issue, as could places like Indonesia and Malaysia, given the involvement of some of their citizens in international terrorist networks and their proximity to the Philippines. Thus, although the Philippines currently stands out as a future draw for jihadist foreign fighters, there are numerous other possibilities. In any of these cases, the numbers involved are likely to be very small in comparison to conflict zones such as Syria, and most of it is likely to involve intraregional, rather than global travelers. However, even

a few skilled terrorist operatives can have an outsized impact, and this will therefore remain a concern for Indo-Pacific countries for some time.

“Frustrated” Foreign Fighters, “Home-Grown” Cells, and Lone Actors

A closely related set of challenges concerns so-called “frustrated” foreign fighters, meaning those who wanted or attempted to travel to Syria but were unsuccessful, as well as “home-grown” cells and lone-actor terrorists who choose to act at home. On the one hand, these groups and individuals tend to be relatively low in capability, because they have not had access to the kind of training and experience that they could acquire in a conflict zone. On the other hand, their bloodlust remains unsatisfied, and their intent to do harm is often high. Furthermore, they sometimes manage to team up with local groups or organizations that augment their capabilities and provide them with opportunities to act. The Indonesian couple responsible for the suicide bombing in Jolo, mentioned at the beginning of this article, is a prime example. In January 2017, they had attempted to go to Syria but had been deported by Turkish authorities.¹⁴⁴ On returning home, they completed a one-month reintegration program, but by December 2018, they had made their way to the Philippines, where they joined with ASG (effectively becoming foreign fighters on their second attempt).¹⁴⁵ By comparison, those who act independently generally achieve far less in terms of casualties but are especially difficult to prevent and can still sometimes have a significant impact. The October 2019 stabbing of Wiranto, Indonesia’s top security minister, by a peripheral member of JAD named Syahrial Alamsyah is a case in point. Although Alamsyah was on the Indonesian intelligence radar, he appears to have told no one except his wife (who was arrested alongside him in the attack) about his plan, and although the stabbing was not fatal, it demonstrated the vulnerability of even high-ranking government officials.¹⁴⁶

As governments in the region become more successful in constraining the activities of established terrorist organizations and dismantling their networks (as Indonesia has against JAD), it is likely that we will see further acts of terrorism committed by (semi)autonomous groups and individuals. This is also likely to be the most common manifestation of the threat in countries that are already relatively secure, such as Singapore and Malaysia. It will furthermore remain the dominant *modus operandi* of right-wing terrorists operating in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Given the renewed intensity with which the right-wing movement is now being scrutinized, it seems unlikely they will be given sufficient room to scale up their level of organization and related capabilities as they might like. Yet we will almost certainly continue to

see sporadic acts of right-wing violence committed by lone actors, occasionally punctuated by mass-casualty incidents as we saw in Christchurch and El Paso.

Terrorist Use of the Internet

Going forward, a related challenge for the region—and a central component of both right-wing and jihadist terrorism—will be terrorist use of the Internet. As discussed earlier, significant progress is being made, as highlighted by the launch of the Christchurch Call. In late 2019, there was also a big push, spearheaded by Telegram in collaboration with Europol, and subsequently taken up by a variety of smaller companies, to deny terrorists access to Internet-based communication platforms. As *the* preferred application for terrorists for some time now, the decimation of their accounts and channels on Telegram was a significant step. ISIS supporters in particular were targeted, first on Telegram and then on each of the other platforms, they turned to (including Riot, TamTam, Hoop Messenger, MeWe, and Mastadon).¹⁴⁷ But as necessary as this sort of action is, it is difficult to sustain indefinitely across a wide enough online space. Less than a month after Telegram's purge, terrorism scholar Thomas Hegghammer observed that “[W]e are definitely witnessing an online jihadi renaissance. Not quite at 2012-14 levels, but much higher than 6 m[on]ths ago, and overwhelming to monitor.”¹⁴⁸

This furthermore dovetails with observations from the region. For example, in September Bangladesh's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit reported that 82 percent of recently arrested terrorist suspects there were recruited online.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, following the death of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi in October, the chief of CT police in Malaysia stated, “What we are most worried about now are ‘lone wolf’ attacks and those who are self-radicalized through the Internet. We are still seeing the spread of IS teachings online.”¹⁵⁰ Terrorist activities on the Internet are also not limited to radicalization and recruitment. As Indonesia's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs stated in a speech at the UN in March, “There is a clear indication that terrorist financing is shifting towards high-tech cyber activities, including sophisticated online transactions.”¹⁵¹ It will, therefore, be imperative for countries to work closely with the tech sector (per the Christchurch Call and the joint efforts of Telegram and Interpol) in an effort to keep pace with evolving terrorist methodologies.

The Specter of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, or Nuclear Terrorism

A final concern for the future of terrorism in the Indo-Pacific involves the potential weaponization of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) materials. Two recent plots within the region have featured attempts to develop

chemical and biological agents, respectively. The first of these was a plot disrupted in Australia in July 2017, in which brothers Mahmoud and Khaled Khayat had intended to first bring down an airliner using a conventional improvised explosive device (IED), and then to develop poisonous gas using viable instructions sent to them by an ISIS handler located overseas (though at the time of their arrest, they had only conducted one test involving chemicals and had not actually manufactured any poison).¹⁵² The second plot was uncovered in October 2019 in Indonesia, where a group affiliated with JAD had acquired rosary pea seeds, which they were using (or had perhaps even managed already), to produce the deadly biological toxin abrin, which they planned to add to an IED.¹⁵³ Both of these developments are obviously concerning, especially when viewed alongside ISIS's other efforts to use chemical and biological materials—including dozens of alleged attacks using chlorine and sulfur gas in Iraq and Syria as well as a plot to poison people with ricin that was disrupted in Germany in June 2018.¹⁵⁴ Together, these incidents are indicative of terrorists' continued, if not growing, interest in developing CBRN weapons. We must not overlook the fact that this also applies to right-wing terrorists, who have collectively established a concerning track-record in this area.¹⁵⁵ However, it is important to recognize that intent is rarely matched by capability or the opportunity to act. The more successful states are in weakening established terrorist organizations, the more that capability is curtailed. Moreover, even ISIS supporters are generally conservative in that most of their attacks involve explosives, firearms, or even more basic weapons such as vehicles and knives.

Thus, although an unsophisticated CBRN attack somewhere in the Indo-Pacific is certainly possible, and governments must do all they can to prevent this from happening, it is not a likely scenario for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

When dealing with a region as vast and varied as the Indo-Pacific, it is impossible to keep track of everything that takes place and easy to lose sight of important developments. Looking back on the previous year's events, terrorists have unfortunately reminded us many times of their continued potency. The attacks in Jolo, Pulwama, Christchurch, and Colombo, in particular, were each devastating for the respective countries and were also of regional, even worldwide, significance. The kaleidoscope of insurgencies that continue to churn away in the background, often receiving little attention from the media, should also not be overlooked. Together, they are indicative of continued, widespread deficiencies in governance in the region, which persist even as the insurgents and terrorists are gradually beaten down.

On the positive side of things, efforts to counter terrorism have significantly reduced the scale and severity of terrorism in the Indo-Pacific, and terrorist organizations in many places are on the back foot. Tactical successes are also increasingly complemented by soft approaches that have the potential to further reduce the violence and, in some cases, pave the way for lasting stability. In addition, there were several notable advancements in international cooperation during the past year, which signify the gradual, collective strengthening of CT in the region.

Looking ahead, there is no immediate end in sight to any of the terrorism problems discussed. Jihadist terrorism may also further ignite in response to smoldering political issues in India, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The threat will also continue to evolve as jihadist veterans of the Syrian war and their families return home or relocate to other locations in the region. Here, the Philippines appears to be particularly vulnerable, but the threat may yet transform in unpredictable ways. Added to this is the numerically greater challenge of frustrated foreign fighters, home-grown cells, and lone actors, many of whom remain steadfast in their commitment to violence. Western countries within the region will also have to contend with right-wing terrorists, who in many ways mirror the jihadist threat. In either case, the Internet will prove to be a key battleground in the fight to prevent and counter the spread of radicalization, while simultaneously monitoring and disrupting existing terrorist networks. Terrorists may seek to innovate in other ways too, such as CBRN attacks, but these remain relatively unlikely.

Naturally, there are innumerable other developments that may take place, and many more challenges that countries of the region will have to grapple with: the increasingly prominent role of women and children in terrorist networks; the burden of expanding terrorist populations in prison; the sobering realization that many of those prisoners will soon be released; the potential resurgence of ISIS in the Middle East, Afghanistan, or elsewhere; a possible comeback for al-Qaeda and associated groups like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia; terrorist use of drones or other emerging technologies; the stubborn persistence of so-called “root causes” of terrorism; and of course, the unending, precarious balancing act needed to maintain security without falling into the terrorists’ trap and sacrificing civil liberties in the process. How each nation responds and copes with each of these challenges will ultimately shape their future, and the future of the region. 🌟

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