The Brewing Storm: 

The Merger Between 

Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group

An Analysis By: 

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In a post 9/11 world, the United States has focused on radical terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa. With the Southeast Asia region festering terrorist growth, particularly the terrorist groups in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia that are known to have ties to what is left of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network, the United States needs to focus resources and concern, as they do with the Middle East, on similar levels before the South Pacific becomes an area that is confronted with even more dangerous terrorist network activity. While President Obama is currently in the South Pacific area, he has stated that security in the region must remain a top priority to the safety and security of the United States and has directed his national security team to make the U.S. presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a central focus. In a recent RAND corporation paper, The Evolving Terrorist Threat in Southeast Asia, RAND concurs and asserts that the United States needs more involvement in the region but in a
“soft” target approach that should focus on educating, training local personnel, and countering the propaganda from terrorist organizations in the region.

The Pan-Pacific region has become a base of operations for past, current, and possible future Al-Qaeda activities via proxy of other Islamic terrorist groups located there. Over the last fifteen years, Al-Qaeda has infiltrated the region by establishing local cells, training Southeast Asia terrorist’s organizations Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members in its camps in Afghanistan, and aiding with financing through various front charities. Indonesia and the southern Philippines have been particularly vulnerable to anti-Western Islamic terrorist groups and have used anti-Islamic sentiment, which is viewed as being generated by the West, to garner more resentment in the native population.

As the focus remains for now on the Middle East, a recent report released by presidential spokesman Edwin Lacierda of Indonesia says, “Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group have merged (Amita O. Legaspi, GMA News).” JI has been blamed for deadly attacks in Indonesia including the Bali bombing in 2002 and Marriot Hotel bombing in 2003. Abu Sayyaf has gained notoriety for kidnapping civilians, including foreign tourists, from Palawan down to neighboring Malaysia in recent years. The events of 9/11 have renewed Washington's awareness in Southeast Asian affairs but discussion and apparent lack of military action by the United States in the region continues to be framed by a security-focused perspective. Bringing together supporters of a linear military approach and proponents of a more comprehensive strategy to counter the region’s terrorism problem, the war on terrorism is likely to reinforce deep-rooted but archaic models of engagement between the United States and Southeast Asia terrorist groups.
In a recent panel discussion with Endy Bayuni, a senior journalist at The Jakarta Post and visiting Fellow of the East-West Center of Washington, he stated that Indonesian security forces along with their Special Forces group, Detachment 88, have been successful in putting down threats and terror plots but each attempt that has been foiled reveals more plots being created. As Indonesia comes into the 21st century with a democratic society, it is struggling to find the synergy with the Muslim-majority population that requests its religion is represented in state affairs.

In my candid interview with Dr. Rohan Gunaratna of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of Singapore, Dr. Rohan stated that Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group in the southern region of the Philippines have merged and this information has come from the open sources of former and captured members of the terrorist group. However, in his assessment JI in the southern region has morphed and is less dangerous than before but this does not take into account the main group in Indonesia. The main group of Jemaah Islamiyah is being watched closely as their activities ramp up with more recent attacks throughout Indonesia. Dr. Rohan also said, “The best way to counteract the terrorism presence is through stronger counterterrorism work and more intelligence gathering.”

When looking at the at the Southeast Asia region, one must consider the range of ways in which to effectively confront and mitigate the damage that terrorist organizations can cause domestically as well as internationally. Gaining a clearer understanding of terrorism in this province of the world will have a significant impact upon the interests of the United States and its allies if proactive measures beyond military considerations are done. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the Southeast Asian region has become refuge of Al-Qaeda members and a "second front" of the U.S. global counter-terrorism operation.
Terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf on an operational level call for new measures in diplomatic, economic, military, and/or political solutions beyond the observe and advice status the United States has now. The sources of income generated especially through kidnapping members of aid groups or visiting tourists needs to be addressed and if need be, travel restrictions or embargos need to be levied. While the ever growing threat of these groups is still present, the elimination of some of their key members has not addressed how to stop them from replacing key officials. Ignoring this region when it finally becomes a problem will be too late. Success in the war on terrorism must therefore rely on reciprocity and cooperation with the region’s governments but not solely be reliant on the United States to do so. The United States must understand if it does not reciprocate more and recognize the sensitive political realities, this could become the next major theater of global terrorism. The United States has to grasp and deal with the concept that these countries offer few incentives to cooperate with Americans but through foreign policy initiatives the United States can overcome this resentment.