Chapter 1

Security and Terrorism in the Malay Archipelago

The Malay Archipelago and the Global War on Terrorism

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the Malay archipelago in terms of physical geography. It describes the archipelago as the largest group of islands in the world, consisting of more than 13,000 islands in Indonesia and about 7,000 islands in the Philippines. The islands of Indonesia include those of the Greater Sundas (Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and the Celebes), the Lesser Sundas, the Moluccas, and Irian Jaya (West New Guinea). The islands of the Philippines include Luzon, the Visayans, and Mindanao. Other political units in the archipelago are the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, the sultanate of Brunei, and the state of Papua New Guinea. This region is also regarded as maritime Southeast Asia, as opposed to mainland Southeast Asia, which is connected by land to the rest of Asia. Although a narrow, geographical definition of the archipelago excludes West Malaysia, which is geographically part of mainland Southeast Asia, both Malaysia and Singapore are usually regarded in discussions on politics as part of the archipelago, given their close political, cultural, and social links with it. In addition, the provinces of Patani, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Yala in southern Thailand, which used to be part of Malay sultanates and that have a large minority of Malay Muslims who share a cultural and religious affinity with Malaysia as opposed to the Thai Buddhist majority in Thailand, are also regarded as belonging
to the broader Malay archipelago. On the other hand, Papua New Guinea is usually excluded from discussions on regional politics because of its greater political and cultural affinity with Pacific Polynesia.²

More significantly, the Malay archipelago has assumed enormous strategic significance in the U.S.-led global war on terrorism following the seminal terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (or 9-11), as it has the world’s largest population of Muslims. Indeed, Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Islam is also the dominant religion in Malaysia and Brunei, and there are also a significant number of adherents in southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, and Singapore. Apart from the geographical definition of the region as somewhat distinct on account of geography, culture, and politics, a key defining feature of this region is its adherence to Islam. Thus, after 9-11, it was no surprise that the region achieved prominence in regional and global security, emerging as a strategic battleground in the context of the U.S.-led global war on terrorism (now referred to under the Obama administration as “the Long War”) in which radical Islamists are trying to gain support for the global jihad.³ In the post 9-11 context, therefore, the Malay archipelago has become synonymous with the Malay Muslim world in maritime Southeast Asia.

After 9-11, the region was designated by the Bush administration as the “Second Front” in the global war on terrorism. This tag could also be attributed in part to the existence of armed Muslim separatist rebellions throughout the Malay archipelago. Although they predated Al Qaeda and the events of 9-11, they came under much greater scrutiny in the context of the global war on terrorism, given the alleged linkages between local Muslim rebels and Al Qaeda. Indeed, Al Qaeda had been seeking to establish such linkages in the hope of co-opting disaffected local Muslims into its global jihad against the West.⁴ Al Qaeda hoped to profit from the presence of fundamental political, economic, and social grievances that underlie the resort to armed rebellion by some Muslims in the region. Thus, prior to 9-11, Al Qaeda had actively sought to establish ties with various local militant and separatist groups in the Malay archipelago.⁵

The region is also important strategically because it is the location of the busiest and most important waterway in the world, namely, the Straits of Malacca, which has been the subject of growing concern in recent years over maritime security on account of the many piracy attacks taking place against commercial shipping. Following 9-11, these concerns coalesced into fears of a possible piracy-terrorism nexus that could lead to acts of maritime terrorism in the Straits,