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A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF ASEAN IN COMBATING TERRORISM

¹Shaibal Das and ²Priyotosh Sharma

^{1&2}Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

Assam University

Silchar, Assam, India

Abstract

The Association of South-East Asian Nations, popularly known as ASEAN, is a regional organization of South-East Asia. It consists of ten South-East Asian countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Brunei. The ASEAN was formed in 1967 with a view to promote economic, political and security cooperation among the member countries. ASEAN is considered as one of the successful regional organizations in the globe. However, it has witnessed setback in different areas at different points of time. The chief causes which affect the peace and security of the region include territorial and jurisdictional disputes, nuclear proliferation in North East Asia and South Asia, impact of globalization and terrorism. Terrorism has, now, become a global threat which disturbs international peace and security. Like other international actors, ASEAN is also concerned with the rise of terrorism. ASEAN strongly condemns terrorism in its all forms and promises to stand by the United Nations in its fight against it. At the same time, it promises to enhance coordination at all levels to check the growth of terrorism in the globe in general and in Asian region in particular. This paper analyses the role of ASEAN in combating terrorism and the challenges in this regard.

Keywords: ASEAN, South-East Asia, Terrorism, Challenge.

Introduction

The Association of South-East Asian Nations, popularly known as ASEAN, is a regional organization of South-East Asia. It consists of ten South-East Asian countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Brunei. The ASEAN was formed in 1967 with a view to promote economic, political and security cooperation among the member countries. It seeks to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the South-East Asian region. It provides assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in educational, professional, technical and other fields.

ASEAN as a regional organization was formed by the Governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand at Bangkok, Thailand in 1967. ASEAN has important dialogue partners which include Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, the USA, China, India, Russia and the Republic of Korea. It has its permanent Secretariat and headquarters at Jakarta, Indonesia. After its formation, ASEAN made little progress except some periodical meetings and basic discussions. However, in post-1975, ASEAN started emerging as an active regional organization having some definite goals and aims. With the passage of time, ASEAN started getting significance by the fact that it ensured and showed a genuine effort to solve various Asian problems in a cooperative situation. Although, it is mainly concerned with economic cooperation and economic development, it has also focused on other social problems of ASEAN region. (Chander & Arora, n.d)

ASEAN has also taken into consideration the problem arising from foreign influences in the region. It develops various projects to improve tourism, shipping, trade, business and so on. ASEAN is considered as one of the successful regional organizations in the globe. However, it has witnessed setbacks in different areas at different points of time. The chief causes which affect the peace and security of the region include territorial and jurisdictional disputes in regard to South China Sea, nuclear proliferation in North-East Asia and South Asia, impact of globalization and terrorism. The human rights issues in junta-led Myanmar, drug trafficking and many other reasons have also affected peace in ASEAN region. Now ASEAN members have been trying to develop cooperation and joint effort at all levels for fighting international and trans-national terrorism and issues like illegal migration, cyber-crimes and so on. (Ghosh, 2016)

Terrorism has now become a global phenomenon and day by day its intensity is increasing. All the international and regional organizations including ASEAN are highly concerned about the rising threat of terrorism. ASEAN is against all the forms of terrorism and it supports the United Nations in its fight against it. ASEAN also promises to provide support and coordination at all levels to check this menace in South East Asia as well as across the globe. However, several counter terrorism initiatives have been taken by the ASEAN to combat this menace. ASEAN is also working towards the implementation of 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda



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which is very essential for South-East Asia to eradicate violence and terrorism and for the establishment of a prosperous and peaceful society. ASEAN alone cannot win the fight against terrorism and therefore it requires a well-designed and strategic support from the international community and it is working in this regard. The consequent discussions highlight the role and challenges of ASEAN in combating terrorism.

The Response of ASEAN towards Terrorism

In the 21st century, terrorism has become a global threat. With the advancement of information and telecommunication technology, the reach and presence of terrorism has become worldwide. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America, the international community have realized that a joint cooperation from all the countries and regional organizations is very much essential. South-East Asia is also not free from terrorism and therefore ASEAN as a regional organization of South-East Asia has a major role to play. In the recent years, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has started spreading its ideology in the South East Asian region and the terrorist attack in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia on 14 January, 2016 is a testimony to this. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism (ADJACT) in 2001, two weeks after the formulation of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) which is a forum of 21 countries including the ASEAN countries and the USA. The ASEAN also extended full support to the ‘War on Terror’ started by the United States of America in 2001. After the Bali bomb blast in Indonesia in October, 2002, ASEAN adopted another counter terrorism framework known as the ASEAN Declaration on Terrorism and it recommended extensive cooperation among the member states for actively fighting this global threat. The ASEAN has also signed several counter terrorism agreements with countries like the United States of America, India, Russia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Republic of Korea.

In 2002, the ASEAN countries, such as, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia have signed various counter terrorism agreements among themselves for better border security control, intelligence sharing and safety of air passengers. Other ASEAN countries have also signed such kind of agreements. The ASEAN has adopted the Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (MLAT) in 2004. The main objective of MLAT is to strengthen the security agencies of the ASEAN countries and to increase the coordination among them and also to take initiatives to foster the investigation process related with terrorism. After this treaty, in 2009 the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter Terrorism was adopted. This plan aimed at eradicating the roots of terrorism and their network and at the same time increasing the capacity and the strength of the ASEAN counter terrorism mechanisms. The guidelines of the ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter Terrorism are as follows:

- Full support and cooperation to the United Nations’ and other global counter terrorism strategy and frameworks.
- Adoption of legally binding regional counter terrorism laws and declarations.
- Formulation of regional forums for better sharing of intelligence information and terrorist movements.
- Undertaking political and social reforms to deal with the issue of terrorism.

The ASEAN has adopted the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT) in 2011. However, it was fully ratified by the member states of the ASEAN in 2013. The adoption of ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism is an important achievement of ASEAN. The ACCT urged the member countries to increase the diplomatic ties, political coordination and capacity building among themselves to actively fight against this threat. However, ASEAN also regularly conducts joint military and naval exercises with countries like United States of America, India, Russia, Japan and Australia. Countries like Myanmar and Thailand have become a safe hub for illicit drugs. The supply of drugs and narcotics has become a business for terrorists to generate income for their terrorist activities. However, ASEAN has signed several agreements with countries like India, Russia, Japan and the United States of America to actively fight against drugs and narcotics. ASEAN is also increasing its ties with several countries and regional organizations for better foreign relations and to fight against issues like trans-national and international terrorism, global warming, illegal migration, cyber-crimes, territorial disputes regarding South China Sea. There are several challenges in South East Asia but ASEAN as a regional organization is playing a significant role for the all-round economic development of ASEAN as well as for maintaining peace and prosperity in South East Asia and for making South East Asia a terror free region. (Nasu, Tan, 2016)

Challenges

South East Asia is facing several challenges and complexities in the way of combating terrorism. The problem of terrorism in South East Asia cannot be solved by a single country. Although several initiatives have been taken by the ASEAN to combat terrorism but various political and legal challenges are there. At present the network and activities of ISIS and Al-Qaeda are continuously rising in South East Asia and it is a challenge for ASEAN as well as for the South East Asian countries. The ASEAN has adopted several counter terrorism declarations and conventions but the guidelines and principles of these mechanisms are not properly implemented and it is a big threat for the security of South East Asia. According to the security agencies, almost 10 to 20 thousand terrorist supporters are active in the South East Asian countries and it poses an obstacle for the governments to eradicate terrorism from the



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South East Asian soil and therefore it is the need of the hour to increase the extensive cooperation among the security agencies of ASEAN countries. All the ASEAN countries should join hands in this fight by removing their internal differences. ASEAN should increase the cooperation with the United Nations and its specialized agencies and with the regional organization like the European Union. They should implement all the counter terrorism frameworks at the earliest and at the same time they should undertake all the necessary strategies and steps as it is a global fight and support from all the stakeholders is very essential. (Gunaratna, 2018)

Conclusion

In 21st century, terrorism is the biggest threat in front of the humanity. Almost every region in the world has been suffering from this threat. After the 9/11 attacks in the New York and Washington DC of America, the international community is continuously fighting against terrorism. ASEAN is playing a significant role to eradicate terrorism from South East Asia but still much more work needs to be done. It is the responsibility of ASEAN for maintaining peace and prosperity in South East Asia and therefore all the countries in South East Asia should work together and should follow the guidelines of ACCT and ASEAN Comprehensive Plan of Action on Counter Terrorism. South East Asia is a prosperous region and a comprehensive role of ASEAN in the counter terrorism measures can make South East Asia a powerful region and economic hub in the world.

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