

TERRORISM *Hagai Segal*

Why we can't drop our guard

If there were any doubts that Asia, and the Asia-Pacific region, needs to remain vigilant to the threat from terrorism this year, they should have been quickly dispelled. First, Bangkok was shocked on New Year's Eve by eight co-ordinated bombings. Then, on January 5, mainland police raided an East Turkistan Islamist Movement "terror camp" in Xinjiang region (新疆自治區). And, on January 11, there were three bombings in the Philippines as the country began hosting the Asean summit.

It is of little surprise, then, that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations conference opened last Wednesday with regional terror at the top of the agenda. Members agreed to establish a common terror group list. Its composition will be decided later, but it certainly will include al-Qaeda and its most active regional "affiliate" – Jemaah Islamiyah. Asean is also likely to endorse a counterterrorism convention.

Numerous states are strongly advocating such initiatives, facing profound

threats from regional and global terrorists. The Jemaah Islamiyah threat in Indonesia remains high, while Singapore is maintaining a major internal security emphasis on counterterrorism, convinced that it is a key target for regional extremists. Australia, also a focus of al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, remains on high alert, as well.

Region-wide co-operation is essential, and is, to an extent, already occurring behind the scenes, as illustrated by the role taken by Australian specialists in the investigation into Thailand's New Year's Eve bombings.

Closer to home, terrorism will certainly be on Beijing's agenda this year. While the risk of attacks, especially in Hong Kong, remain low, the dynamic Xinjiang situation remains a concern.

The PLA recently held a major counterterrorism exercise with Pakistani counterparts, while East Turkistan Islamic Movement militants were reportedly training in militant camps in Pakistan. And in his New

Year address, it was noticeable that President Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) emphasised the issue of terrorism and national harmony, clear references to the Xinjiang separatists. The January 5 raid that is reported to have left at least 18 "terrorists" dead, and netted materials to make 1,500 explosive devices, marked the first time a terror camp has been identified as existing on mainland soil.

Some analysts question whether the terror threat is as real as the authorities would have us believe – seeing counterterrorism activities in Xinjiang as a cover for Beijing to act against far more benign pro-independence groups. Yet, there is no doubt that the threat is being taken seriously.

Authorities will, however, be mindful of the dangers of a policy that could result in an internationalisation of the Xinjiang context, and thus the possibility that – Chechnya, Afghanistan or Iraq – it could become a rallying cause for global

Islamist extremists. China will certainly wish to avoid becoming a focus of al-Qaeda, having no interest whatsoever in a "war on terror" of its own developing beyond the specific context of Xinjiang.

In many ways, 2006 was a relatively good-news year for counterterrorism; there were few attacks, and numerous successes in identifying and stopping bomb plots, with regional hot spots such as Indonesia surprisingly quiet. Yet the general threat still remains considerable – al-Qaeda and its affiliates may be on the run, but they are also continuously reorganising, and adapting to the global security and intelligence efforts against them. Thus, while terror may be slowly on the decline, complacency is not an option. And that remains as true in 2007 as it was in 2006.

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