advisory

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IMAN Research is a think tank focusing on research and community engagement. Our research areas include preventing/countering violent extremism (PCVE), socio-religious trends and public perception.

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editorial letter

It is now July 2020, and there is not a day when we at IMAN wonder if things will turn for the better. Covid 19 is a given, and we will have to live with the fact that it destroys economies, countries and communities. The United Nations has already warned us that the coronavirus could cause a global mental health crisis, especially those vulnerable to mental distress, including children and young people, and healthcare workers who see patients dying from COVID-19.

In all our advisories, we talk and emphasise how Covid is also a security threat, and again we remind you that this is not something to take lightly. The virtual conferences IMAN attended on security and preventing violent extremism demonstrate that the threat of terror is a reality, and that we cannot let down our guard. It may look like we have a stable government now, but our internal politics have a direct impact on domestic, regional and international security too.

Now that we have entered the second half of the year, all we can wish for you, dear reader, is that a miracle happens. Because at this point, it's all we have.

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ONGOING SECURITY CONCERNS

AS WE REACH the middle of 2020, the issue of security continues to loom over Malaysia. While we are still dealing with COVID-19 and its implications socially and economically, we are also still not entirely safe from terror attacks. Our borders are still exposed to hostile elements, and we are still at risk from foreign terror fighters entering our country and setting up bases here. One of the main issues that is still unresolved is regarding possible returnees from Syria. Throughout the war in Syria, more than 1,000 fighters from Southeast Asia travelled there to join the Islamic State (IS) and other militant groups, and among them 65 Malaysians are still there.[1]

1 https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3048468/what-do-asias-returning-isis-fighters-do-next-youre-about-find

The Malaysian government under the PH administration has stated that they will bring home the 65 Malaysians, which is a good move from our part that should be lauded and supported.[1] Although, the issue of rehabilitation and reintegration needs to be focused on, and it requires careful design and planning that involves whole-of-society, and not the prisons department alone.

However, what also needs to be taken seriously is returning fighters in our neighboring countries. As we know, terror networks are cross-border and regional. Returnees can potentially access the existing network in the region, which opens our country to be vulnerable. Although our borders are still closed due to the pandemic, and border control especially in the east coast of Sabah is tightened, the risk of returning fighters slipping into our territory is still there. Just recently, the Philippines Coast Guard stated that a small group of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members armed with assorted firearms is planning to conduct activities in an undisclosed area in Sabah.[2]

Kidnapping activities are also still happening at our borders. The kidnapping near Pulau Tambisan earlier this year is still unresolved. According to Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), all the five victims are still held hostage.[3] ESSCOM Commander Datuk Hazani Ghazali described the effort to trace kidnapping cases in the waters of the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) as akin to a game of cat-and-mouse.[4] In addition, according to IMAN's field operator, movements in-and-out of our Sabah borders are still occurring throughout all phases of our Movement Control Order (MCO), especially around Semporna island.

We also need to be very cautious with what's going on beyond our borders. Issues relating to geopolitical conflicts, as well as the rise of extremist sentiments, from religious extremism, to right-wing nationalism, needs to be followed closely. Charismatic and controversial figures have the capability to influence people all over the globe, including ours.

Moreover, we need to be very careful not to be caught in the middle of two warring states, either militarily or economically. From US-China trade war, to US-Iran tension, as well as the China-Japan-Korea conflict, we need to be careful not to become collateral damage, while at the same time maintaining our sovereignty and not becoming another country's stooge. The quarrel between the US, Australia and China due to COVID-19, and the recent border clashes between India and China troops might have regional implications.[5] We need to tread carefully and not become an unnecessary casualty.

Let us also not forget the issue of refugees. Malaysia has been a recipient of war victims, from the time of Vietnam civil war in the 1970's to the conflict in Aceh, Pattani and as recently as 2017, the Rohingya refugee crisis. As conflicts in the region and in other parts of the world do not seem to be ending soon, Malaysia is increasingly becoming the destination for people fleeing their home countries. And with many developed countries closing their borders for refugee resettlement, Malaysia is no longer seen as a transit country, but rather as the final destination for refugees.[6] We need to start thinking beyond hosting them temporarily, how to integrate them as permanent residents and part of the Malaysian society.

1	https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/467795
2	https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ship-operations/abu-sayyaf-targeting-kidnapping-vessels-east-malaysia
3	https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2020/05/685212/esscom-kenal-pasti-lima-dalang-kumpulan-penculikan
4	https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/590388/esscom-updates-wanted-list
5	https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3089255/three-indian-soldiers-killed-clash-chinese-border-army-says
6	https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/stuck-hope-fades-refugees-malaysia-closes-door-200308063143495.html

From PH to PN:
Malaysia's Security Roadmap

THE FIRST YEAR of Pakatan Harapan's (PH) rule saw reform initiatives on the drive, covering numerous socio-economic aspects, a stark contrast from during Barisan Nasional's 60-years in government. Among them were the recovery of 1MDB assets, Malaysian army pulling out of war torn Yemen, a firm position in support of the Palestine right to homeland, a renewed holistic approach on the refugees and undocumented migrants, a redefinition of an equal partnership agreement between Peninsula Malaysia with Sabah and Sarawak as espoused in the Malaysia Agreement 1963. In terms of security, the Ministry of Defense under PH produced its first Defense White Paper (DWP) in December 2019, to advance the inclusivity between military and civilian arms in the interest of the nation.

Although the idea was coined much earlier by previous administrations (in line with Malaysia's New Economic Policy formulae), Malaysia's first Defence White Paper was published in December 2019, a few years behind many developed countries' own defense strategy.[1] Many friendly countries offered assistance and technical skills in charting the country's new defense approach. According to the official document, "Malaysia's new defense strategy would encapsulate every aspect of the national security in what the paper termed as "Whole-of-Government" and "Whole-of-Society".

Meanwhile at the regional front, the PH government made several inroads in dealing with backlogs crises within the region. PH's position under Tun Dr Mahathir was to increase lucrative trade cooperation between neighbors

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1   *Kertas Putih Pertahanan (KPP) Malaysia by the Ministry of Defense (MoD) http://www.mod.gov.my/ms/ maklumat/kertas-putih-pertahanan*

in Asia, making friends with China and Japan — the regional powerhouses — maintaining open diplomatic channels over territorial disputes. At the same time, PH was also vying for an increase in military budget that covers the procurement of advance military war chest, drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to monitor Malaysia's two bodies of water, dubbed "potential theatre of war", as well as preventing terrorist activities or insurgency spillover, in line with the changing global security landscape.

In addition, Malaysia was vocal on human rights issues. The Foreign Ministry was tasked to look into the Rohingya refugee crisis and pressuring Myanmar government to take responsibility as obligated under international laws; urging insurgent groups in Thailand and the Philippines to opt for dialogues and negotiations; all this while treading carefully about its vision of Total Defence – Pertahanan Menyeluruh.

The DWP

There were many criticisms towards the Defense White Paper (DWP), especially on how much it would cost Malaysian taxpayers. The Defense Minister at the time, Mohammad Sabu, explained that the defense ministry would need around 6.5% of the annual budget in order to implement the DWP. However, under the current global situation, the DWP is a must-have. During this challenging time, pointing to current waves of cyber terrorisms, returning of jihadist fighters, climate crisis, trans-boundary conflicts — a new normal type of non-conventional warfare — we cannot afford to sacrifice the country's territorial integrity.

The DWP was designed to serve as our national narrative on the modernisation of the country's security. The document states that "Malaysia renounces the use of threat and application of force as a means of settling international conflict and advocates and practices the peaceful resolution of disputes." This is especially so, because of recent escalation between claimants of offshore islands in the South China Sea. As an active member of ASEAN, as well as having roles to play at the international level, Malaysia cannot afford to be a passive neighbour, or even remain oblivious to threats from within its borders, including homegrown terrorists. Under this new national defence policy, Malaysia will embark on a totally new range of security management, including equipping its citizens with an enhanced theory of defence, which would increase professionalism and patriotism.

Unfortunately, the previous government's attempt to organise a nationwide campaign to explain the DWP and its defense policy was halted in its tracks following the unprecedented political crisis in February that saw PH replaced by Perikatan Nasional (PN). And that too just as the world began to learn more about the deadly novel coronavirus. No countries were more prepared than others in mitigating the pandemic as the effectiveness of healthcare systems began to unravel. It is still too early to gauge whether the current administration (under Prime Minister Muhyiddin) will be implementing these proposals, especially when he too held a high profile position in the PH government as Minister of Home Affairs, which oversees all internal and external security issues.

It is also worth noting that there was a missed opportunity to 'test' the "Whole-of-Government" and "Whole-of-Society" defense approach as proposed in the DWP in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the military was deployed in major populated areas, seemingly to assist police and health workers during the MCO, what was not available throughout the MCO period was makeshift health-care tents, much like Japan or South Korea where residents have easy access to compulsory health checks, or, where the armed forces conducted humanitarian or logistical supports during evacuation or search and rescue missions. The deployment of troops to the streets had initially caused speculation and scepticism about its purpose and effectiveness, especially when the government was not communicating its decision publicly.

Finally, the country's security roadmap would be incomplete without an understanding of the importance of the Whole-of-Society model, where coordination between the government, the institutions and the public must be forged. The DWP posits that there is a short-term to long-term plan (within a 10-year time frame) between 2020 and 2030. The slowdown in the economy due to the pandemic must not be an excuse to delay implementing the key strategies discussed in the paper. Although there are details in the DWP that need to be refined and improved through further consultations with state and non-state stakeholders, this initiative needs to continue regardless of which coalition is in power. It is a legacy that would set a solid strategic direction for the country beyond political skirmishes. Risking that now could mean Malaysia loses its charm offensive as a magnet between the West and the East.

CAUGHT NAPPING:
Malaysia must prioritise a National P/CVE Strategy

MALAYSIA HAS FOR decades dealt with the threat of violent extremism (VE) within its borders by utilising a number of national security legislations such as the now abolished Internal Security Act (ISA), the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), the Prevention of Crime Act 1959 (POCA) and most recently the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA). These preventive laws, coupled with commendable counter-terrorism policing, have kept the country safe from any deadly attacks. However, the threat is omnipresent.

In order to better protect their citizens in this digital age, governments have had to think up innovative new strategies to address the complex and unpredictable drivers of VE. A 'whole-of-society' approach has long been advocated by practitioners working in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), but finding the right balance between traditional 'hard' security measures and 'soft' alternatives has been a struggle thus far. To bridge this gap, the United Nations developed a guideline for member states to formulate National Action Plans (NAP) on P/CVE.

On its part, Malaysia has been working on the NAP since the UN secretary-general outlined the comprehensive Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2015. The plan recommended that "each member state should consider developing a national plan of action to prevent VE, which sets national priorities for addressing the local drivers of extremism and complements national counter-terrorism strategies where they already exist".[1]

Five years on, however, Malaysia has yet to roll out any iteration of this action plan.

1	United Nations (2015), 'Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism': https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/plan_action.pdf

Meanwhile, neighbouring countries like the Philippines have already introduced theirs.[1] Alongside them, at least a dozen more countries published NAPs by the end of 2019, including Lebanon, Maldives, Morocco, Nigeria and Pakistan.[2]

Malaysia has fallen behind the pack, but what is really causing the delay? After all, the action plan does not require us to build from scratch as the UN plan provides a comprehensive policy framework for countries to emulate. Malaysia can also rely on the positive track record of its counter-terrorism apparatus in guiding its strategy going forward.

Hedayah Centre, a leading international organisation on P/CVE programming, revealed that Malaysia was also one of several nations that had engaged the centre's dedicated taskforce to help craft the NAP.[3] What conclusions were derived from that engagement, and why are we not acting on the recommendations of this taskforce?

Even more perplexing is that to date, there is no evidence of any formal consultation or engagement with civil society and other stakeholders in formulating the P/CVE action plan. In late last year, the Education Ministry in collaboration with IMAN organised a national symposium on preventing violent extremism through education. But this was one of only a handful of government-led initiatives on P/CVE. Due to limited available information on the NAP (it is bound up under the Official Secret Acts), our knowledge of its progress is based solely on the occasional comments from senior government officials and media reports.

As such, the wider assumption is that we are making piecemeal progress on the NAP, and this is not good enough for a country that has seen increased susceptibility to violent extremist ideology due to prevailing ethno-religious tensions.

Moreover, the arrival of COVID-19 should not serve as an excuse for the government to stall progress further. On the contrary, the pandemic has exposed deeper societal fault lines – primarily the rise of hateful extremism, stigma and xenophobia against vulnerable communities – that only reinforces the urgent need for a national P/CVE strategy.

Despite the compounding economic challenges posed by the current health crisis, Malaysia must find a way to actualise the NAP. We are particularly hopeful that it will gain more traction under the premiership of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, especially since he previously oversaw its development as Home Minister. Incidentally, the last public update on the NAP did come from Muhyiddin himself.

"We will refer to several guidelines set by international bodies to ensure uniformity, and we want to gain from the past experience. The government is in discussion and has not made any decision (on the implementation) because it involves various agencies, not just the Home Ministry."

– Muhyiddin, Malaysiakini (Aug 2019)

While the statement was rather vague and non-committal, we certainly feel that as prime minister, Muhyiddin should make the P/CVE action plan a priority deliverable. If there is political will and a genuine desire to introduce a holistic P/CVE strategy – on top of the existing 'hard security' measures – then rest assured that the host of international and local actors working in this domain stand ready to assist in its effective implementation.

1   https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/whats-behind-the-philippines-new-strategy-for-countering-violent-extrem-ism/

2   https://institute.global/policy/future-national-action-plans-prevent-violent-extremism

3   https://www.hedayahcenter.org/programs/preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-national-ac-tion-plans-task-force/

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