



MISSED SIGNALS: ANALYZING THE FAILURE OF INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION IN ASEAN IN PREVENTING THE JOLO CATHEDRAL BOMBINGS 2019

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Abstract:

This research examines the failure of ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) to face the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombings. ASEAN's first intelligence cooperation initiative, known as AOE, was established in 2018 in response to the growing threat of transnational terrorism (ISIS) in the region. The Jolo Cathedral bombing was one of the deadliest suicide bombings in the Philippines, demonstrating the inability of AOE as a counterterrorism mechanism to face the threat of transnational terrorism. The findings of this research shed light on the two major factors - the absence of an agreed standard of procedure and the lack of early warning systems - that contributed to the failure of the AOE. The gaps identified highlight areas for improvement in intelligence cooperation and underscore the need for standardized procedures and robust early warning mechanisms to enhance ASEAN's collective response to transnational terrorist threats.

Keywords: Intelligence cooperation, ASEAN Our Eyes, Jolo Cathedral Bombings, ISIS, counter-terrorism cooperation.

Titulo en Español: *Carencia de señales: Análisis del fracaso de la cooperación de inteligencia en ASEAN en la prevención de los atentados de la catedral de Joló en 2019.*

Resumen:

Esta investigación examina el fracaso de ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) para hacer frente al atentado en la catedral de Jolo en 2019. La primera iniciativa de cooperación de inteligencia de la ASEAN, conocida como AOE, se estableció en 2018 en respuesta a la creciente amenaza del terrorismo transnacional (ISIS) en la región. Este atentado fue uno de los atentados suicidas más mortíferos en Filipinas, que demostró la incapacidad de la AOE como mecanismo antiterrorista para hacer frente a la amenaza del terrorismo transnacional. Los hallazgos de esta investigación arrojan luz sobre dos factores principales -la ausencia de un estándar de procedimiento acordado y la falta de sistemas de alerta temprana- que contribuyeron al fracaso de la AOE. Las lagunas detectadas ponen de relieve áreas de mejora en la cooperación en materia de inteligencia y subrayan la necesidad de procedimientos normalizados y mecanismos sólidos de alerta temprana para mejorar la respuesta colectiva de la ASEAN a las amenazas terroristas transnacionales.

Palabras Clave: *Cooperación en inteligencia, ASEAN Our Eyes, atentados en la catedral de Jolo, ISIS, cooperación antiterrorista.*

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1. Introduction

International cooperation in counter-terrorism (CT) plays a crucial role in safeguarding the security and national interests of member states, including regional security. Specifically in ASEAN, the threat of transnational terrorism remains real and continues to evolve. The bombing incident at Jolo Cathedral in Southern Philippines in 2019, also known as the Jolo Cathedral Bombings, was the largest suicide bombing case in Southeast Asia, marking a watershed of escalation in violence conducted by ISIS-affiliated terrorists in the region³. This terrorist attack exhibited two characteristics: the involvement of transnational terrorist groups and the intelligence failure that contributed to the success of the fatal terrorism⁴. In addition, the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombings also highlight the nexus of transnational terrorism and the problem of reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) as the attack was achieved through the recruitment of two returning FTFs from Indonesia⁵. Thus, the Jolo Cathedral Bombings highlight serious issues regarding CT cooperation in ASEAN, particularly in the realm of intelligence collaboration.

However, the 2019 Jolo Cathedral Bombings marked not only a point of escalation in terrorist attacks but also a point of reflection for CT cooperation in the region. We highlight the role of ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) to counter the region's unique transnational terrorism problem as an important mechanism for intelligence cooperation in ASEAN. Established in 2018, this framework represents the first intelligence cooperation in ASEAN in the field of CT. The emergence of AOE was driven by the increasing transnational threat of terrorism in the region, necessitating more concrete cooperation in combating such threats. The Siege of Marawi in 2017 in Southern Mindanao, Philippines, involving foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) and suicide bombings in Lamitan, Basilan, Southern Philippines, demonstrated the vulnerability of the ASEAN region as a battleground for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist groups, which prompted the formation of intelligence cooperation in ASEAN⁶.

The Jolo Cathedral Bombings hold significance in the development of transnational terrorism and the strengthening of intelligence cooperation in ASEAN. The suicide bombing on January 27, 2019, at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Jolo claimed the lives of 23 civilians and left 111 others injured.⁷ This incident is recorded as the deadliest suicide bombing in the Philippines. The Abu Sayyaf group, affiliated with ISIS, claimed responsibility for the bombing. Furthermore, the two suicide bombers involved in the Jolo Cathedral Bombings were Indonesian nationals acting as Pro-ISIS FTF in Southern Philippines.

The suicide bombing incident carried out by the Indonesian FTF in Southern Philippines raises significant questions about the effectiveness of AOE. This intelligence cooperation mechanism has been established since 2018. Therefore, this article discusses the obstacles AOE faces as the main mechanism of intelligence cooperation in countering transnational terrorism. The structure of this article is divided into four parts. First, the introduction provides background and contextualizes the article's topic. Second, a literature review on intelligence cooperation in CT is presented. Third, an explanation of AOE is provided. Fourth, an analysis

³ "Global Terrorism Index 2020": Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, at <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>

⁴ "The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines", at <https://understandingconflict.org/en/publications/The-Jolo-Bombing-and-the-Legacy-of-ISIS-in-the-Philippines>

⁵ Lakshmi, Sylvia: "Nexus Between Charities and Terrorist Financing in Indonesia", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Vol. 11, n° 7 (September 2019), pp. 6-10.

⁶ Singh, Jasinder: "The 2017 Marawi Attacks : Implications for Regional Security", *RSIS Commentaries*, n° 120 (June 2017), at <https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10356/83596/1/CO17120.pdf>

⁷ "The Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT)", at https://cpost.uchicago.edu/research/suicide_attacks/database_on_suicide_attacks/



of the obstacles faced by the AOE mechanism is conducted using the case study of the Jolo Cathedral Bombings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings of the study.

2. Literature Review

This section presents previous studies on intelligence cooperation and is divided into two categories. First, intelligence cooperation in counter-terrorism provides a fundamental understanding of what intelligence cooperation is, its forms, and the challenges of implementation. Second, the obstacles to intelligence cooperation in ASEAN.

2.1 Intelligence Cooperation in Counter-Terrorism

In the past two decades, a global CT effort have experienced significant development. Countries have gathered strength through CT cooperation at the international and regional levels, prioritizing efforts to prevent terrorist attacks. In this context, countries utilize transnational cooperation mechanisms, including in the field of intelligence.

Intelligence involves a series of processes that transform random information into strategic data for decision-makers. Intelligence organizations aim to provide comprehensive and accurate insights derived from raw information for political decision-makers.⁸ The significance of CT cooperation in intelligence is emphasized by UN Security Council Resolution 1373. This resolution encourages all countries to enhance joint efforts in the fight against terrorism. Specifically, the resolution urges countries to increase and expedite the exchange of information, particularly related to the activities or movements of individuals or terrorist networks. Additionally, the resolution calls for broader cooperation to prevent and thwart terrorist attacks, as well as to take action against the perpetrators of such acts.⁹

Intelligence cooperation plays a key role in global and regional CT efforts. To enhance CT strategies, the majority of academics and practitioners agree that the best way to address the terrorist threat is through intelligence efforts and cooperation.¹⁰ Practically, several reasons drive intelligence cooperation. First, there is a clear terrorist threat that is increasingly transnational. Individual states do not have the means and jurisdiction required to track terrorists, identify their plans, and prevent them from carrying out attacks. This demands intergovernmental responses, and the best way is to share information about terrorist networks, their modus operandi, profiles, and intentions.¹¹

Understanding intelligence cooperation needs to be interpreted through two operational principles. First, intelligence cooperation can strengthen alliances, but on the other hand, it is also marked by competition over how such cooperation should be conducted. Funding and human resources involved in CT are also objects of competition. Second, intelligence cooperation by professionals is understood as a framework for exchanging intelligence.¹² The manifestation of intelligence cooperation is flexible, adapting to the contexts and needs of the involved countries. There are six categories of intelligence cooperation in general¹³: 1) suspect profiling; 2) identification of terrorist supporters and political activists; 3) tracking terrorist movements based on intelligence from informants or spies; 4) detecting new terrorist strategies, including monitoring advancements in their weapon technology; 5) reporting on prevented,

⁸ Johnson, Loch K: "A Framework for Strengthening US Intelligence", *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, n° 2 (February 2006), pp. 116–131.

⁹ *Resolution 1373*, at https://www.unodc.org/pdf/crime/terrorism/res_1373_english.pdf

¹⁰ Schmid, Alex P (2011): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, Oxon, Routledge.

¹¹ Guttman, Aviva: "Combatting Terror in Europe: Euro-Israeli Counterterrorism Intelligence Cooperation in the Club De Berne (1971–1972)", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 33, n° 2 (2018), pp. 158-175.

¹² Jaffel, Hagger Ben: "Britain's European Connection in Counter- Terrorism Intelligence Cooperation: Everyday Practices of Police Liaison Officers", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 35, n° 7 (2020), pp. 1007-1025.

¹³ Gutmann, Aviva, *op. cit.*



executed, or failed terrorist attacks based on interrogations of captured terrorists; and 6) establishing a warning system for planned attacks and alternative scenarios.

The urgency of intelligence cooperation presents substantial challenges in its implementation. The complex mechanism of intelligence processes is not immune to unexpected interventions and intangible threats, often resulting in intelligence failures. Betts argues that "intelligence failures are not only unavoidable but also natural."¹⁴ Furthermore, intelligence failures are caused by failures that occur in four phases of intelligence: planning and direction, collection and assessment, analysis, and dissemination.¹⁵ Other factors that cause intelligence failures are failure of leadership and policy, organizational and bureaucratic issues, problems in warning systems, and analytical failures.¹⁶

To categorize it further, intelligence failures can be divided into three areas: traditional school (failure in analysis and policy), reformist school (failure in organization and bureaucracy), and contrarian school (failure caused by information collection errors).¹⁷ Meanwhile, the causes of failure of intelligence cooperation are also interconnected and can be defined in three groups. First, failure is caused by intelligence and agency errors. Second, failure due to policy or directives given. Third, failure is caused by psychological errors.¹⁸ Another aspect to consider in intelligence cooperation is human rights and the confidentiality of personal data.¹⁹ The tendency to expand authority, both intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies, in terms of sharing intelligence and information raises issues, particularly regarding the protection of human rights and personal data.²⁰ In the context of constraints on intelligence cooperation in developing countries, there are six factors that hinder cooperation: 1) politicization of security institutions, 2) authoritarianism, 3) weak institutions and the prevalence of informal power, 4) high levels of corruption, 5) anti-American sentiment, and 6) tolerance for internal chaos.²¹

2.2. The Limit of CT Cooperation in ASEAN

Intelligence cooperation between ASEAN member states on the issue of CT has not been without hindrances. Three factors hinder ASEAN's CT cooperation: (1) domestic dynamics on CT policies, (2) non-intervention principles, and (3) the various functions of ASEAN as regional cooperation.

The first category highlights the domestic dynamics of ASEAN member states that hinder the implementation of cooperation in addressing transnational terrorism threats. Several studies found that ASEAN's CT efforts are politically charged, leading to competition among domestic institutions that ultimately hinder intelligence sharing in ASEAN.²² Building on the

¹⁴ Betts, Richard: "War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable", *World Politics*, Vol. 31, n° 1 (October 1978), pp. 61– 89.

¹⁵ Johnson, Loch K, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Copeland, Thomas (2007): *Fool Me Twice: Intelligence Failure and Mass Casualty Terrorism*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV.

¹⁷ Dahl, Erik. J (2013): *Intelligence and Surprise Attack: Failure and Success from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 and Beyond*, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press.

¹⁸ Khan, Masrur: "Intelligence Failure in Countering Terrorism in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Holey Artisan and Easter Attacks", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (June 2023), pp. 1-18, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2023.2227188>

¹⁹ Schmid, Alex, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Cocq, Céline: "Development of Regional Legal Frameworks for Intelligence and Information Sharing in the EU and ASEAN", *Tilburg Law Review*, Vol. 20, n° 1 (December 2015), pp. 58-77.

²¹ Byman, Daniel: "US Counterterrorism Intelligence Cooperation with the Developing World and Its Limits", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 32, n° 2 (September 2017), pp. 145-160.

²² Seng Seng Tan, Kumar Ramakrishna: "Interstate and Intrastate Dynamics in Southeast Asia's War on Terror", *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, n° 1 (2004), pp. 91–105, at



concept of bureaucratic resistance, it reveals the potential for information leaks and the tendency of patron-client culture in intelligence agencies. This hampers intelligence cooperation in ASEAN in addressing suicide bombing cases in Jolo in 2019.²³ On the other hand, other literature argues that intelligence cooperation between national and regional institutions can be achieved through trust and confidence among ASEAN member states.²⁴ In the case of ASEAN, trust and confidence among member states are still in the early stages of development due to differences in perceptions of terrorism threats, definitions, and forms. This is influenced by intra-regional factors, such as the diversity of cultures and traditions in each country.²⁵

The second group of literature draws emphasis on how the application of the ASEAN Way principle hampers CT cooperation efforts in the region. Sensitivity to non-intervention principles leads ASEAN member states to focus only on their national agendas, without integrating them with the security interests of neighbouring countries.²⁶ In the context of maritime security cooperation in ASEAN, sensitivity to territorial sovereignty issues becomes a constraint that hinders the effective implementation of joint patrols and the right of hot pursuit.²⁷ However, terrorism threats are transnational, requiring a more integrated level of CT cooperation among relevant countries.

There is no single root-cause for terrorism in Southeast Asia; the landscape of terrorism has been marked by separatist movements in Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia, Communist insurgency in the Philippines, and Islamist terrorism in Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore.²⁸ Thailand and Myanmar's terrorist problem has been separatist in nature with Thailand facing low-level insurgency in the Malay Muslim provinces in its Malay Muslim southern provinces and Myanmar facing rebellion of ethnic minorities living along its periphery against the central government since the country's independence in 1948. The Philippines' terrorist problem is marked by Maoist insurgency led by New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and separatist rebellion of the Bangsamoro which has been largely settled by a peace agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014. Nevertheless, after the termination of Marawi siege led by the ISIS-affiliated Maute group in 2017, the Philippines still witnessed active and locally isolated Islamist militant groups loosely connected under Islamic State East Asia Philippines. Finally, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have been facing terrorist threats emanating from the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiah (JI) which has seen its power significantly reduced to being largely non-violent Islamist movement. The spread of ISIS ideology in the region since 2014, has resulted in the existence of Islamist groups in Indonesia that have all been weakened yet highly active in cyberspace, including the Jemaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), and Anshar Daulah groups.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26999203>; Seng Seng Tan, Hitoshi Nasu: "ASEAN and the Development of Counter-Terrorism Law and Policy in Southeast Asia", *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, Vol. 39, n° 3 (2016), pp. 1219-1238; Anindya, Chaula: "Bureaucratic Resistance and The Challenge of Implementing ASEAN Our Eyes: Case Study of Jolo Church Bombing 2019," *Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional*, Vol. 24, n° 2 (November 2022), pp. 186-204, at DOI: 10.7454/global.v24i2.1252

²³ Anindya, Chaula, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Singh, Daljit: "Responses to Terrorism in Southeast Asia", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 4, n° 1 (2009), pp. 15-28, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335300.2009.9686921>

²⁵ Cocq, Céline: "Development of Regional Legal Frameworks for Intelligence and Information Sharing in the EU and ASEAN", *Tilburg Law Review*, Vol. 20, n° 1 (December 2015), pp. 58-77.

²⁶ Chow, Jonathan: "ASEAN counterterrorism cooperation since 9/11", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, n° 2 (March 2005), pp. 302-321, at <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2005.45.2.302>

²⁷ Singh, Daljit, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Tan, Andrew: "Evaluating counter-terrorism strategies in Asia", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 13, n° 2 (June 2018), pp. 155-169, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2018.1473628>



In the midst of the variety of terrorism's root causes, a semblance of unity in response to terrorism has been achieved in the ratification of ASEAN Convention on Counterterrorism which was produced in 2007 but came into force in 2011 after six member states ratified it.²⁹ The ACCT was finally ratified by all members in 2013. The length with which the ACCT undertook to achieve full ratification testifies to the gradual and limited character of trust building and policy harmonization that can be achieved at a regional level on the issue of CT. Trust-building in CT cooperation – like in other security issues of the region – is subject to the tradition of ASEAN to implement regional initiatives at a pace comfortable to all member-states. The third strain of argument regards ASEAN structural condition which may have led to under-prioritization of cooperation by member states' respective intelligence communities. Intelligence cooperation serves the purpose of confidence building and maintaining a reliable degree of trust building in the midst of geopolitical rivalry that potentially breaks up the regional union.³⁰ Security cooperation in Southeast Asia serves a 'hedging utility' purpose, i.e. "soft balancing strategies and engagement policies" which maintains the potential for collective action and production of public goods and maintain a safe distance between ASEAN members and the great powers.³¹ In other words, security cooperation in Southeast Asia is not solely directed to address security problems and build regional peace, but more importantly to preserve national political stability, habit of dialogue and engagement of major powers.

In addition, the Syrian civil war was a game changer that complicates intelligence cooperation in Southeast Asia. ISIS in Syria devised a propaganda that drove people with no previous connection with any jihadi networks, including women and children to travel to Syria and join the group's fighting. This pluralization of terrorist actors also brought with it the pluralization of methods of financing and recruitment leading to difficulty in exchanging reliable and verified information of suspected Foreign Terrorist Fighters³².

The most effective institutional mechanism for counterterrorist cooperation in suppressing acts of terrorism has so far been minilateral rather than multilateral. This has been exemplified by Trilateral Maritime Patrols initiative between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines launched in 2017 in the form of coordinated naval patrols in areas affected by sea piracy by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Sulu and Celebes Seas.³³ The TMP initiative has improved communication and information exchange among the participating states, and involved extra-regional powers in capacity building support to members states which helped them address maritime insecurity.³⁴

In summary, intelligence for CT cooperation in Southeast Asia has been limited by a number of factors. First, Southeast Asian states are facing terrorist problems with different root-cases, all pertinent to the unfinished nation-building problem that has beset the Southeast Asian states since their inception, including national consolidation, conforming ideological and

²⁹ Tan, Nasu, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Ali Wibisono, Aisha Kusumasomantri: "Expectations and Limitations of ASEAN-EU Counter-terrorism Cooperation", *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, Vol. 8, n° 1 (2020), pp. 61–80, at <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v8i1.6171>

³¹ Ruland, Jurgen: "Southeast Asian Regionalism and Global Governance: Multilateral Utility or Hedging Utility?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 33, n° 1 (April 2011), pp. 83–112, at <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-1d>

³² "Financing and Facilitation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Returnees in Southeast Asia", at <https://apgml.org/includes/handlers/get-document.ashx?d=7108bed0-ae47-459c-b4b8-95f96c23b23d>

³³ Indra Alverdian, Marko Joas, Nina Tynkkynen: "Prospects for multi-level governance of maritime security in the Sulu-Celebes Sea: lessons from the Baltic Sea region". *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs*, Vol. 12, n° 2 (2020), pp. 108–122, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2020.1770944>

³⁴ Storey, Ian: "Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas : A Work in Progress", *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute*, n° 48 (2018), pp. 1–7.



religious diversity, and the states' institutional capacity. Second, ASEAN member states pursue different styles of CT, relevant to their needs of prioritizing either military, criminal justice, or national security approach, depending on the degree of readiness in institutional building and political-legal acceptability. Finally, ASEAN has a limited capacity for enforcement of binding agreements, which means unilateral collaboration would carry out more practical implementation of CT cooperation.

In our case study, the ASEAN Our Eyes Initiative is still gradually building a secure mechanism of strategic information exchange to anticipate possible shared threats in the region related to violent extremism and terrorism through timely exchange of strategic information between ASEAN member states. Existing lack of SOPs of secure intelligence exchange that assisted field agents render the cooperative mechanism unable to prevent a terrorist attack in the region.

3. Methodology

This article utilizes a deductive qualitative method. Qualitative research is a methodological approach employed in social science research that focuses on exploring and understanding the complexity of human behaviour, experiences, and social phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes the collection and interpretation of non-numerical information such as words, images, and observations. Moreover, the qualitative approach places more emphasis on words rather than numbers and highlights three features: an inductive approach to examining the relationship between theory and research, an understanding of the social world through the interpretation of its society, and an emphasis on social structure as the interactional construction between individuals.³⁵

The article employs two types of data: primary data and secondary data. The data collection technique involves desk and library research. Primary data will be obtained through official government documents and official information released by the government. Secondary data will be gathered through a literature review from various credible sources, including journals, books, news, and previous literature.

The data processing technique to be used in this research is the categorization of data according to the framework of analysis. The categorization process is essential to provide the appropriate context for interpreting the data. Furthermore, this research will employ the method of triangulation of observers to test the validity of data from interviews, literature reviews, and other sources. The triangulation method is useful for reducing research bias and ensuring the validity of cross-checking references

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE)

AOE is an intelligence cooperation mechanism formed in response to the increasing wave of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and the development of ISIS groups in the region. The Marawi conflict, which lasted for approximately five months (from May to October 2017), was the first open conflict to occur in ASEAN, involving pro-ISIS terrorist groups (non-state actors) fighting against the sovereign security forces of the Philippines. There are estimated to be around 1,000 - 1,200 ISIS militants fighting in Marawi, 40 of whom are FTFs from Indonesia.

³⁵ Bryman, Alan (2012): *Social Research Method*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.



Furthermore, the Marawi conflict was supported by 16 pro-ISIS groups (ISIS-affiliated).³⁶ Some of these groups include:

Table 1. List of Pro-ISIS Groups in the Philippines

Group Name	Number of Militants
IS Sulu - Basilan	400 - 570
IS Lanao (Maute Group)	263
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)	406
Ansar Khilafa Mindanao	3 - 37

Source: Ryacudu, 2018

In October 2017, Indonesia, represented by former Indonesian Minister of Defence Ryamizard Ryacudu, initiated an intelligence cooperation framework with five ASEAN Member States (AMS): the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Known as the Our Eyes Initiative (OEI), this intelligence cooperation framework consists of five main components: database procurement, security personnel exchange, joint operations and exercises, sharing of expertise, and sharing of resources and experience.³⁷ Essentially, this initiative aims to facilitate intelligence cooperation on terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremist groups that are emerging in ASEAN countries.

ASEAN Our Eyes was also formed because of the government's anxiety about seeing the growing threat of terrorism in the region, especially regarding the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters to their homes.³⁸ Moreover, several countries in Southeast Asia are the areas of origin of these returnees.

The OEI has experienced significant development in recent years. On October 19, 2018, all ten AMS adopted the first intelligence cooperation framework in ASEAN. Additionally, the 12th ADMM and 5th ADMM-Plus meetings produced the "Our Eyes" Initiative Concept Paper.³⁹ This document is crucial for the development of the OEI as it provides detailed information on the objectives, scope of cooperation, and cooperation mechanisms. Furthermore, the Defence Ministers in ASEAN agreed to produce the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) through the 13th ADMM in Bangkok on July 11, 2019. One important point in the TOR AOE is the commitment of AMS to establish Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the operationalization of AOE (twelve months after the adoption of TOR).⁴⁰ In addition to demonstrating the AMS' commitment to CT efforts through intelligence, the SOP also indicates a detailed mechanism for the implementation of intelligence cooperation in the field. However, the SOP AOE has not yet been formed as of the writing of this document.

³⁶ Ryacudu, Ryamizard: "Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Need for Joint Counter-Terrorism Frameworks", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 10, n° 11 (November 2018), pp. 1-3.

³⁷ Parameswaran, Prashanth: "ASEAN Our Eyes Meeting Spotlights Counterterrorism Cooperation", *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/asean-our-eyes-meeting-spotlights-counterterrorism-cooperation/>

³⁸ Interview with Head of Multilateral Sub-Directorate, Directorate of International Cooperation, Directorate General of Strahan, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, Colonel Kav Oktaheroe Ramsi, 23 October 2019.

³⁹ "ADMM Concept Papers", at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/2012-12-05-19-05-19/admm1/concept-papers.html?start=40>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*



Table 2. AOE Meetings on ADMM Level

Name of Event	Date	Location
“Our Eyes Initiative” Joint Working Group	30 October 2017	Indonesia
12 th ADMM and 5 th ADMM-Plus	19 October 2018	Singapore
"Our Eyes" Working Group Meeting	29-30 October 2018	Indonesia
2 nd Working Group Meeting on “Our Eyes”	22-25 January 2019	Myanmar
13 th ADMM	10-12 July 2019	Thailand
3 rd Meeting of the Working Group on ASEAN Our Eyes	4-5 March 2020	Indonesia
4 th Meeting of the Working Group on ASEAN Our Eyes	11 August 2020	(via video conferencing)
5 th Meeting of the Working Group on ASEAN Our Eyes	4-5 Mei 2021	(via video conferencing)
6 th Meeting of the Working Group on ASEAN Our Eyes	10-11 January 2022	(via video conferencing)
7 th Meeting of the Working Group on ASEAN Our Eyes	31 January – 3 February 2023	Indonesia

Source: ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meetings, 2023

The AOE-related declaration points included in each of these ADMM meetings⁴¹ are as follows:

Table 3. ADMM Joint Declaration

Name of Event	Declaration Point
12 th ADMM and 5 th ADMM-Plus (October 2018)	<i>Adopt</i> the “Our Eyes” Initiative as a platform for strategic information exchange amongst ASEAN Member States on terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism, and other non-traditional threats in the region; <i>Welcome</i> the “Resilience, Response, Recovery” (“3Rs”) Concept as a useful framework for guiding future ADMM and defence sectoral discussions on counter-terrorism initiatives and efforts.
13 th ADMM (July 2019)	<i>Adopt</i> the Terms of Reference (TOR) of the AOE to

⁴¹ “ADMM Current Calendar Year”, at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/events/past-meetings-and-events/7-news.html>



	describe the provisions and platform governing the AOE strategic information exchange system
14 th ADMM (December 2020)	<i>Adopt</i> the Standard Operating Procedure of the ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) as a strategic information exchange procedure and mechanism among ASEAN Member States on violent extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism
15 th ADMM (June 2021)	N/A
16 th ADMM (June 2022)	N/A
17 th ADMM (November 2023)	N/A

Source: ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meetings, 2023

Several achievements or progress from ASEAN Our Eyes have been carried out. Before ASEAN Our Eyes was formed, there was a system and mechanism to support the operationalization of ASEAN Our Eyes, namely ASEAN Direct Communication Infrastructure (ADI). At the 8th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on 20 May 2014, the ASEAN Defence Ministers adopted a Concept Paper on ASEAN Direct Communication Infrastructure (ADI) through the ADMM forum. The concept paper promotes the goal of establishing a permanent, fast, reliable and confidential means by which ASEAN Defence Ministers can communicate with each other and reach joint decisions in dealing with crisis or emergency situations. The platform has evolved to include plus countries to meet the overarching goal of establishing ASEAN as an inclusive, rules-based community.

In the future, ADI will use video conferencing to make it easier for ASEAN Defence Ministers to communicate in emergency situations. In its development, ADI not only covers ADMM member countries, but also includes ADMM-Plus, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States.⁴² The expansion of ADI to ADMM-Plus countries is aimed at meeting the overarching goal of establishing ASEAN as an inclusive, rules-based community that will respond effectively to emerging challenges in a dynamic region and play a responsible and constructive role globally while maintaining ASEAN centrality. ADI is the platform that will be used to support the implementation of ASEAN Our Eyes.⁴³

ADI is a platform that supports ASEAN Our Eyes activities, as stated in the ASEAN Our Eyes Standard Operational Procedure (SOP) which is still a draft and not yet ratified,

⁴² “2021 Concept Paper on The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting’s External Engagements”, at <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2021-ADMMs-External-Engagements-Concept-Paper.pdf>

⁴³ “2019 Concept Paper on The Expansion of The ASEAN Direct Communications Infrastructure in The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Process to The Plus Countries”, at <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-ADMM-CP-ADI-Plus.docx>



prepared on November 16, 2020.⁴⁴ In the objectives section, it is explained that the Strategic Information Exchange (SIE) mechanism or strategic information exchange aims to anticipate possible shared threats in the region related to violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism through timely exchange of strategic information between AMS.

The SIE mechanism will leverage ADI as a secure communications platform between ASEAN Defence Ministers in promoting rapid responses to emergencies and to prevent and mitigate misinterpretation of strategic information among AMS. SIE aims to support the decision-making process of ASEAN Defence Ministers regarding violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism through the following action plans: a. Updating and exchanging strategic information; and b. Facilitate bureaucratic communication processes and facilitate access to strategic information for ASEAN Defence Ministers.

In its operationalization, each member country will build Our Eyes Command Center (OECC) which functions as the center of the ASEAN Our Eyes unit in each country to manage strategic information from various sources in each member country. The main task of the OECC is to collect, manage, analyze, evaluate and distribute strategic information related to violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism from various sources in each member country to the ASEAN Minister of Defence. In terms of infrastructure, each OECC is equipped with infrastructure to support the process of collecting, managing, analyzing and submitting results to the ASEAN Minister of Defence. The SIE between ASEAN Defence Ministers is supported by the ADI network. Each OECC or similar facility must have the capability to support and secure SIE, to ensure communications are secured and cannot be interfered with or tampered with by unauthorized parties.

Despite the existing technical guidelines to maintain secure exchange of information, ASEAN Our Eyes is still unable to effectively maintain synergy between agencies in Indonesia even though *Badan Intelijen Negara* (State Intelligence Agency/BIN), *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* (National Counter-Terrorism Agency/BNPT), *Badan Intelijen Strategis Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (Indonesian National Armed Forces Strategic Intelligence Agency/BAIS TNI), *Staf Intelijen TNI* (Intelligence Staff of TNI/Sintel TNI), *Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Politik, Hukum, dan Keamanan* (Coordinating Ministry for Politic, Legal and Security/Kemenkopolkam), *Kementerian Luar Negeri* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Kemlu), and Main Control Center (MCC) are partners of the Ministry of Defence in operationalizing ASEAN Our Eyes. Our interviewees also acknowledged the lack of synergy.⁴⁵ Another indication of this lack of synergy is the lack of updated information about the development of ASEAN Our Eyes which is held by *Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan Kementerian Pertahanan* (Research and Development Agency of Ministry of Defence/Balitbang Kemhan) as an agency under the Ministry of Defence that plays a role in various policies and policy evaluations from the Ministry of Defence.⁴⁶ This indicates weak management of strategic information and intelligence that contributed to intelligence failure in preventing acts of terrorism.

⁴⁴ “Pertemuan ASEAN Our Eyes Working Group ke-3, Indonesia Usung Rancangan SOP”, at <https://setnasasean.id/siaran-pers/read/pertemuan-asean-our-eyes-working-group-ke-3-indonesia-usung-rancangan-sop>

⁴⁵ Interview with Head of Multilateral Sub-Directorate, Directorate of International Cooperation, Directorate General of Strahan, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia, Colonel Kav Oktaheroe Ramsi, 23 October 2019.

⁴⁶ Interview with the Head of the Defense Strategy Research and Development Center of the Ministry of Defense Colonel Tek Basuki Rahmat P. Sianturi, 13 October 2020.



4.2. The Failure of the AOE Mechanism in Countering Terrorism: The Case of Jolo Cathedral Bombings 2019

Based on the introduction and literature review, this section explains the failure of the intelligence cooperation mechanism within the AOE through a case study of the Jolo Cathedral Bombings in Southern Philippines in 2019. The article discusses two significant factors that contributed to this failure, namely the absence of agreed standard operating procedures (SOP) in the cooperation mechanism and the weakness of warning systems in preventing terrorist attacks by ISIS/Pro-ISIS terrorist groups in the region.

4.2.1. The Absence of Agreed Standard of Procedure (SOP)

The adoption of the ASEAN Intelligence Sharing and Cooperation (ASEAN-AOE) in 2018 by ten ASEAN countries was not sufficient to facilitate intelligence cooperation in addressing the threat posed by ISIS terrorist groups in the region. This was merely an initial step and needs to be accompanied by concrete measures reflected in the agreement of the ASEAN-AOE Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). The presence of SOP is necessary to provide practical and measurable guidelines on the specific steps to be taken in the context of ASEAN cooperation. It is important to understand further that intelligence cooperation is a complex and challenging type of collaboration, as it involves strategic and sensitive information. Therefore, SOP is needed to provide clear and established foundations to prevent the misuse of data that may lead to operational failures.

The absence of agreed SOP in the CT cooperation mechanism in ASEAN is not a new issue. The same challenge is also faced by the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Generally, the TCA facilitates joint patrols in the Sulu-Sulawesi Sea to maintain regional security stability against terrorism threats. Since its establishment in 2017, the TCA has yet to have SOP for the implementation of joint patrols, and it is limited to coordinated patrols.⁴⁷ This constraint is due to the non-intervention principle of ASEAN and sensitivity towards the maritime boundaries of the relevant countries due to the historical territorial dispute among member states (Malaysia vs. Philippines over Sulu; Indonesia vs. Malaysia over Sabah). Therefore, it indicates a lack of trust among the TCA members to share sensitive intelligence and prioritization of domestic security rather than transnational or regional security.

The initiation of the AOE was inspired by Western intelligence cooperation known as the Five Eyes. In October 2018, the Indonesians defence officials visited Europe to study and gain support.⁴⁸ Formed after World War II in 1946, the Five Eyes is an intelligence alliance involving the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand, focusing on signal intelligence (SIGINT) collection and exchange. Its main objective is to enhance the national security of each member by combining and sharing intelligence information. Despite being known as one of the most secretive and influential intelligence alliances in the world, the Five Eyes has an SOP that covers various aspects, including security mechanisms to protect shared information, procedures for handling received intelligence, and guidelines for collaboration in various security areas such as SIGINT and threat analysis.⁴⁹

⁴⁷“Menhan Prabowo Bertemu Menhan Malaysia dan Filipina, Bicarakan Kerja Sama Keamanan Maritim”, at <https://www.kemhan.go.id/2022/03/28/menhan-prabowo-bertemu-menhan-malaysia-dan-filipina-bicarakan-kerja-sama-keamanan-maritim.html>

⁴⁸ “Aliansi Intelijen ASEAN diperluas untuk Melawan Ekstremisme”, at <https://ipdefenseforum.com/id/2019/02/aliansi-intelijen-asean-diperluas-untuk-melawan-ekstremisme/>

⁴⁹ “Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC)”, at www.dni.gov: <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/ncsc-how-we-work/217-about/organization/icig-pages/2660-icig-fiorc>



Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the distinction between the AOE and Five Eyes initiatives regarding their cooperation objectives. The Five Eyes alliance necessitates a more profound integration of intelligence sharing, wherein member states collaborate to bolster individual national security endeavors. Conversely, the AOE's primary tenet of intelligence sharing revolves around non-intervention, thereby abstaining from involvement in the domestic political affairs of participating nations. Such dissimilarities give rise to two significant implications. Firstly, the potential for intelligence operations to encounter obstacles stemming from conflicting political interests becomes apparent. Secondly, the intricate bureaucratic procedures inherent in the AOE framework inevitably prolong the processing of information and decision-making processes.

Drawing upon these two illustrative cases, it becomes evident that the implementation of SOPs plays a pivotal role in delineating the efficacy of intelligence cooperation initiatives. The establishment of a comprehensive and mutually agreed-upon SOP within the AOE framework is imperative, as it furnishes explicit delineations of responsibilities and authorities to the pertinent stakeholders engaged in CT operations. The lessons gleaned from the experiences of the TCA and the Five Eyes alliance underscore the pressing need for AOE to expeditiously formulate and implement SOPs to avert the recurrence of incidents akin to the Jolo Cathedral Bombings.

4.2.2. Lack of “Warning Systems” in the Intelligence Cooperation

The lack of cooperation between AOE agencies through warning systems resulted in two Indonesian FTFs successfully detonating themselves in Jolo, Southern Philippines. According to Indonesian police reports, the two perpetrators, a husband and wife named Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani, were members of the Pro-ISIS terror group in Indonesia, known as *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD). The table below provides information on the journey of Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani before their suicide bombing on January 27, 2019, in the Southern Philippines.

Table 4. Rullie and Ulfah’s Historical Traces Related to Terrorism Before the Jolo Cathedral Bombings 2019

Year	Description
1999	Rullie was first exposed to the radical group
2014	Rullie and Ulfah expressed their willingness to become suicide bombers. This was conveyed when they delved into radical ideology through Khalid Abu Bakar in 2014 in Surabaya, East Java.
March 2016	Rullie and Ulfah departed to Syria
January 2017	Rullie and Ulfah were deported from Turkey and returned to Indonesia (after arriving in Indonesia, they went through a rehabilitation program until completion)
August 2018	Rullie arrived in Jolo via Sabah, Malaysia
27 January 2019	Ulfah arrived in Jolo via Sabah, Malaysia

Source: Benarnews.org

Table 4 shows that the two Jolo suicide bombers are not "new players" in terrorism. In fact, it can be said that their involvement with terrorist groups has been longstanding and has shaped them into loyal followers. Police reports reveal that Rullie and Ulfah's failure to reach Syria motivated them to carry out suicide bombings in the Southern Philippines to fulfil their

mission⁵⁰. In Indonesia, Rullie and Ulfah were said to be part of the Jemaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), but in the Philippines the attacks were attributed to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), while ISIS also claimed responsibility. The suicide bombings that the two Indonesians carried out were well-coordinated with the first suicide bomber's detonation attracting first responders, followed by the second blast. In total, the two suicide bombings killed 22 and injured 101 others.⁵¹

Figure 1. The Aftermath of the Jolo Cathedral Bombings



Source: IDN Times

It is important to underline that this couple had previously undergone a rehabilitation program in Indonesia, but they returned to radical beliefs after approximately a year. Based on this series of events, there should be strong communication and intelligence exchange between the ASEAN Member States (AMS), particularly between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, regarding the list of individuals under terrorism surveillance. This list or database is a part of intelligence sharing aimed at preventing terrorist attacks. The absence of an accurate and timely database hinders the proper functioning of warning systems.

Furthermore, the occurrence of this terrorist act elicited divergent reactions from Indonesian and Filipino authorities. On January 29, President Rodrigo Duterte disclosed to the press that intelligence sources suggested the perpetrators of the bombings were potentially of Indonesian origin. This assertion was subsequently corroborated by the Philippine Interior Secretary, Eduardo Ano, on February 1. Conversely, Indonesian officials expressed outrage over these allegations and dispatched their own Anti-Terror Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88) to gather intelligence at the site of the incident. The Indonesian ambassador in Manila issued a formal inquiry to the Foreign Secretary of the Philippines, seeking clarification on the matter and expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of prior notification regarding the accusation of Indonesian involvement in the Jolo bomb attack. Meanwhile, Indonesian Foreign Minister

⁵⁰ Firdaus, Arie: "WNI Pelaku Pemboman di Gereja Filipina Terpapar Radikalisme Sejak Usia Belasan", *Benar News*, 25 July 2019, at <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/eni-pembom-gereja-filipina-07252019164117.html>

⁵¹ "Global Terrorism Database: Incident Summary", at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtdid=201901270004>



Retno Marsudi emphasized that there was insufficient evidence to confirm the involvement of Indonesians.

The escalation of suspicion between Indonesia and the Philippines, as exemplified by the Jolo Cathedral Bombings case, has had adverse repercussions on CT cooperation, particularly within the field of intelligence sharing. The above explanation shows that there is a missing link in cooperation and signifies a perception that Indonesia and the Philippines see each other as unreliable partners. Consequently, this observation also implies that members of the AOE continue to perceive terrorism threats predominantly through a domestic lens rather than acknowledging their transnational nature.

5. Conclusion

The cooperation against terrorism has been growing in parallel with the increasing transnational terrorist threats. Intelligence cooperation is the most influential form of CT in addressing terrorism threats. In 2018, the ten ASEAN countries committed to adopting the first intelligence cooperation mechanism in ASEAN, known as ASEAN Our Eyes. However, on January 27, 2019, a husband and wife from Indonesia successfully carried out a suicide bombing, making it the largest suicide bombing attack in Southeast Asia. Thus, this phenomenon indicates the failures and obstacles in the implementation of AOE.

This article finds that two factors have caused AOE to fail in addressing transnational terrorist threats, with a case study of the Jolo Cathedral Bombings. First, the absence of agreed Standards of Procedure within AOE has made the cooperation mechanism unable to be effectively implemented. Second, weak warning systems and suspicious responses between the Indonesian and Filipino officials in handling this issue show a problematic relation toward the CT cooperation. AMS still does not perceive terrorism threats in the region as a collective threat, but rather at the domestic level. In other words, AOE seems to showcase a hedging utility of ASEAN in their CT in the region.

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