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SYNOPSIS

Just days after the May 10 ceasefire between India and Pakistan, Operation Sindoor sparked a new battle – one of narratives. Eschatological propaganda like Ghazwatul Hind is spreading across Southeast Asia, turning foreign military conflicts into ideological ones that fuel local radicalisation and challenge regional counter-extremism efforts.

COMMENTARY

Just days after a May 10 ceasefire reduced the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, a new confrontation emerged – not of missiles and soldiers, but of symbols and stories. Both sides claimed victory in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, India's retaliatory strike following a deadly terrorist attack on April 22 that killed 26 civilians in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir.

The Resistance Front (TRF), a little-known militant group existing in Pakistan, initially claimed responsibility, prompting India to accuse Pakistan of backing the attack. Pakistani officials denied involvement. Operation Sindoor triggered ideological shockwaves that now reverberate far beyond the subcontinent, particularly across Southeast Asia.

This incident reveals a fundamental truth: in a hyper-connected world, the real threat isn't just territorial – it is how conflicts are digitally reframed, spread, and consumed far from their origin.

Ideological Contagion Through Social Media

The link between conflict and terrorism is well established. The Global Terrorism Index 2025 reports that 98 per cent of terrorism-related deaths occur in active conflict zones, highlighting how war zones serve as both physical and ideological incubators for extremism.

Even “frozen conflicts” with sporadic violence and unresolved sovereignty claims provide fertile ground for radical ideologies to germinate and spread.

Southeast Asia has long been vulnerable to transnational radicalisation, as seen when Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members trained in Afghanistan, Mindanao, and Kashmir. Local grievances were reframed through global jihad narratives, amplified by close networks and digital communication.

The impact of Operation Sindoor did not end with India’s airstrikes. Within hours, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) released a communiqué through its al-Sahab media wing, denouncing the operation and calling for retaliation. The message quickly spread through Telegram channels, including those specifically targeting Southeast Asian audiences, with content in the Malay and Indonesian languages.

The most troubling aspect was the use of theological narratives like *Ghazwatul Hind*, an eschatological concept, frequently invoked by jihadist groups, of a final battle between Muslims and non-Muslims for the Indian subcontinent. Once fringe, it is now central in jihadist propaganda. India and Pakistan’s identity-based rhetoric further fuelled hatred and violence, undermining counterterrorism efforts. Indonesian-language Telegram groups quickly engaged, debating martyrdom and framing neutrality as betrayal in a perceived civilisational war.

Responses are resonant, and the narratives are out of control. Over only five days, a video of a Malaysian cleric in TikTok exaggerating India as anti-Islam with a list of alleged atrocities received more than 12,600 likes and was forwarded at least 3,250 times. This shows that the narratives are spreading rapidly, opening windows for broader radicalisation across communities.

The above illustrates how distant conflicts are cognitively reframed and emotionally internalised by Southeast Asian extremists.

Local Grievances, Global Justifications

The spillover of such narratives into Southeast Asia is not merely rhetorical – it carries real-world consequences. Court documents from recent terrorism trials in Indonesia reveal a growing trend: individuals increasingly cite foreign policy grievances as justifications for violence.

From 2020 to 2022, based on research by co-author Prakoso Pernomo, India was mentioned at least 23 times as “the enemy of Islam” in Indonesian pro-jihadist online networks. The rhetoric frequently focused on alleged Muslim persecution in India. A call to jihad was circulated in 2022, pointing out the Embassy of India in Jakarta as the target.

This narrative shaped at least four terrorism case verdicts in Indonesia, where exposure to the Kashmir conflict helped radicalise individuals and motivate attacks. One case even involved a plot to retaliate by way of attacks against Indonesian Hindus in Central Sulawesi.

The risks extend to other regional contexts. Indian nationals or diaspora communities in countries like Singapore and Malaysia could become targets of ideologically motivated violence. A case in point involves a Singaporean teenager detained in April, who self-radicalised online under the influence of white supremacist ideology.

Similarly, in 2019, two Indonesian supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) planned attacks against Chinese-owned businesses in Banten province, to the west of the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta, besides 16 other plots against Chinese targets in Indonesia from 2013 to 2020, mixing economic grievances with ethnic resentment.

These examples reflect a broader trend: the hybridisation of extremist ideologies in digital spaces. Disaffected youth draw from diverse ideological sources to construct personalised frameworks for violence and moral justification, using the rejuvenated potential of violent extremist networks.

Beyond Surveillance to Strategic Communication

Today, radicalisation is not just about ideology – it is increasingly about *digital socialisation*, where individuals are drawn into alternative moral communities online. Encrypted apps and social media platforms have created a "*digital ummah*", where memes, short videos, and live-streamed sermons often replace traditional religious guidance and deeper emotional immersion.

The case of Ghazwatul Hind is particularly revealing. Previously confined to obscure theological texts, this prophecy now thrives in TikTok reels, YouTube Shorts, and Telegram stickers. Repackaged with battle footage, nasheeds (songs with spiritual significance in Islam), and cinematic edits, the message is gamified – trivialised yet dangerously compelling.

Southeast Asian governments have invested heavily in counterterrorism, ranging from surveillance to arrests and online content takedowns. Yet these approaches often lag behind the scale, speed, and subtlety of digital extremism.

A paradigm shift is needed. Policymakers must build a strategic communication ecosystem capable of producing compelling counter-narratives that are both emotionally resonant and intellectually credible. The goal is not just to refute extremist content but to provide hopeful, affirming alternatives – narratives grounded in dignity, belonging, and nonviolence.

Credible messengers are vital, including religious scholars, youth influencers, educators, ex-extremists, and local leaders. Their messages must be platform-specific, youth-focused, and culturally grounded.

Religious and ethnic rhetoric must never be politicised. Ensuring safe civic spaces,

especially during political elections, helps block the spread of foreign identity-based narratives. One example was the counter-narrative of Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Opposition parties, when responding to identity politics played online from outside the country during the recent general election in Singapore.

Indonesia's National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism (RAN-PE) offers a promising blueprint. It integrates gender sensitivity, strategic communication, community resilience, and multi-stakeholder engagement. However, effective implementation will require sustained resources, adaptive coordination, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to keep pace with evolving digital threats.

Conclusion: Toward a Framework for Narrative Resilience

Operation Sindoor is a stark reminder that in the digital age, no conflict remains local. What starts in the Himalayas can swiftly become an ideological spark across borders. Extremism no longer needs physical sanctuaries – it thrives in symbolism, ambiguity, and emotional appeal, spreading through the spaces between hashtags and hadiths, alienation and belonging.

Southeast Asia must respond not just with security measures, but with a *story*. By building narrative resilience, we empower communities to resist and replace extremist narratives with those rooted in empathy, pluralism, and peace. Only then can apocalyptic myths like Ghazwatul Hind be disarmed.

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