

Transnational Security in the Sulu Sea: Something New or Something Old?

Joseph Franco

Research fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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States bordering the Sulu Sea have found a new impetus to conduct cooperative security mechanisms to combat violent extremist groups in the southern Philippines. The emergence of Islamic State-linked groups highlighted the shared vulnerabilities of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Joint training exercises and intelligence exchanges have focused on early detection and swift response to potential terrorist plots. Nevertheless, while all these initiatives appear novel, it is part of decades-long military-to-military links. Likewise, the transnational threat posed by non-state armed groups in the proximity of the Sulu Sea can be traced back to the long history of colonial-era piracy and slave trading.

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Introduction

A year after the Battle for Marawi, states bordering the Sulu Sea off the coast of the southern Philippines have heightened cooperative security mechanisms. Intelligence exchanges and joint patrols by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are largely motivated to avoid a repeat of the five month-long siege of the central Mindanao city of Marawi by militants linked to the so-called Islamic State (IS). Aside from the Philippines' Southeast Asian neighbours, other countries in the Asia-Pacific such as the United States and Australia have stepped up their security assistance programmes.

While appearing novel, it must be stressed that as early as the 1970s joint border patrols and military diplomacy have been the norm between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. There is historical awareness of the porous borders shared by the three maritime states. These initiatives exist as part of the broader context of multilateral cooperation as exemplified by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Low-key joint activities often escape public attention and only emerge as crises erupt.

This article will stress how material considerations prompt non-state armed group violence. Rather than being motivated by ideology, groups such as the Philippines' Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Maute Group (MG) often use jihadist discourse to justify their actions. Thus, multilateral efforts must go beyond security operations and other kinetic approaches. Without appreciation of the complexities of conflict in Mindanao, heavy-handed military campaigns and tone-deaf countering violent extremism narratives will only exacerbate insecurity in the Sulu Sea. Instead, cooperation must involve measures further upstream, addressing the issues of socioeconomic issues that drive conflict.

On 23 May 2018, Philippine special operations forces (SOF) attempted to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the erstwhile *emir* or leader of IS-inspired militants in the Philippines. Hapilon was previously known as a leader of an ASG faction based in Basilan province in western Mindanao. The raid was intended to pre-empt a large scale uprising by the MG, which would have culminated in the capture of Marawi City. For five-months, the Maute Group and its allies held off numerically superior forces from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Fighting raged mostly in the commercial centre of Marawi. The lack of AFP intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets hampered the employment of the military's close air support (CAS).

Support from allied militaries were indispensable for the AFP. In terms of ISR, the AFP only had a decisive edge over the MG after it received support from American and Australian ISR aircraft.¹ Copious use of CAS also depleted AFP ordnance stocks necessitating emergency

1 - Australian AP-3 aircraft was deployed over the skies of Marawi. US military advisers also deployed handheld drones.

procurement from overseas sources.² The Battle for Marawi underscored how the Philippines requires foreign support for its internal security operations. Preventing conflict from spilling over from Mindanao motivated its overseas partners to help, owing to the southern Philippines' porous borders.³ There were also concerns albeit far-fetched, that Mindanao is poised to become the new IS caliphate, after territorial losses in Iraq and Syria.⁴



Something New: Recent Initiatives

The novel challenge of IS-inspired groups in the Philippines was made further worrisome by the involvement of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the Battle for Marawi. IS-linked propaganda outlets deliberately made a clarion call specifically for Southeast Asians to fight in Marawi instead if they are unable to make the journey to Iraq and/or Syria.⁵ Transnational cooperation between militants meant that multilateral approaches should be enhanced among the countries that share the Sulu Sea.

As recriminations for the apparent failure of intelligence in Marawi pile up, Manila's foreign allies highlighted the importance of intelligence exchanges. On January 2018, six ASEAN member-countries launched its "Our Eyes" initiative. Under this mechanism, "senior defense officials will meet every two weeks to swap information on militant groups and develop a common database of violent extremists".⁶ Note that the pact included countries not proximate to the Sulu Sea, such as Thailand and Singapore. It was nonetheless a strong signal of the shared awareness of the transnational threat posed by IS-linked groups.

Around the same time, the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte dangled the possibility of allowing foreign militaries notably the Indonesian and Malaysian armed

2 - Aerial-delivered munitions such as aerial rockets were delivered from the United States. See: Roel Pareño, "US delivers weapons for PAF amid Marawi siege" *Philippine Star*, 29 July 2017, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/29/1722681/us-delivers-weapons-paf-amid-marawi-siege> (accessed June 2018).

3 - Some analysts have prematurely declared that the Duterte Administration have secured "strategic control" of the Sulu Sea and its neighbouring waters. An example of such overly optimistic analysis can be seen in Singh, "Post-Marawi Fallout: Further Radicalisation" *RSIS Commentaries*, 02 March 2018.

4 - As early as 2014 the IS leadership appeared to have abandoned its *wilayah* system. See: Charlie Winter, "Has The Islamic State Abandoned Its Provincial Model in the Philippines?" *War on the Rocks*, 22 July 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/has-the-islamic-state-abandoned-its-provincial-model-in-the-philippines/> (accessed May 2018). More specifically, the IS appears to conceded early on that conditions in the Philippines precludes the creation of a *wilayah* or province in Mindanao as seen in *Dabiq* reference. 5 - *Dabiq* no. 5, 1436 Muharram (Nov 2014).

6 - The countries involved were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei. See: Tom Allard, "Southeast Asian states launch intelligence pact to counter Islamist threat" *Reuters*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-intelligence/southeast-asian-states-launch-intelligence-pact-to-counter-islamist-threat-idUSKBN1FE163> (accessed June 2018).

forces to pursue Filipino militants into Mindanao. Duterte remarked that:

“Me, I will allow troops of Indonesia and Malaysia to come in if they are pursuing a lead...and they would think that they are able (to defeat terrorists). Just inform the Armed Forces about it.... I said if it's terrorist, my advice to them is just blow them up. And that's my order to, my suggestion to the meeting. Blow them up....”⁷

Considering the penchant of Duterte to embellish his statements, it is possible that his statements were a reflection of the inability of his Administration to decisively address the threat posed by violent extremist groups in Mindanao, what is more realistic and more likely to be conducted are joint patrols.

In June 2017, the tripartite INDOMALPHI patrols were launched. Naval units from the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN), the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL), and the Philippine Navy (PN) was expected to continue “indefinitely -- until the problems of terrorism and piracy [around] the borders end....”⁸ These maritime patrols were complemented a few months later by a trilateral air patrol, which Philippine Defense Secretary claims would “prevent [extremists] from coming in and also escaping [from Marawi] because a lot of the [foreign terrorist] fighters are also Malaysian and Indonesian...”⁹

Something Old: Military Cooperation Among Maritime Southeast Asian States

While the challenge posed by IS-linked groups appear novel, the aforementioned new solutions are hardly revolutionary as touted. They are neither a masterstroke of foreign policy that emerged only during the Duterte presidency. More than a year before the Battle for Marawi, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines had already agreed to conduct coordinated maritime patrols.¹⁰ It was in response to the spate of kidnappings launched by the ASG operating from western Mindanao.

7 - Allan Nawal and Frinston Lim, “Duterte: Indonesian, Malaysian troops can enter PH in pursuit of terrorists”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 27 January 2018, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/963986/duterte-indonesian-malaysian-troops-can-enter-ph-in-pursuit-of-terrorists>, (accessed May 2018).

8 - Erwida Maulia and Bobby Nugroho, “Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines launch joint sea patrols” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 19 June 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-Relations/Indonesia-Malaysia-and-Philippines-launch-joint-sea-patrols2> (accessed May 2018).

9 - Sumisha Naidu, “First joint air patrols over Sulu Sea launched by Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia”, *Channel News Asia*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/first-joint-air-patrols-over-sulu-sea-launched-by-malaysia-9304708> (accessed June 2018).

10 - Ryan Healy, “Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia Agree to Anti-Piracy Patrols”, *Center for Security Policy*, 06 May 2016, <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2016/05/06/indonesia-philippines-and-malaysia-agree-to-anti-piracy-patrols/> (accessed May 2018).

This arrangement builds upon the pre-existing 1975 Philippines-Indonesia Border Patrol and Border Crossing Agreements.

Launched in 2017, the joint trilateral patrols were the result of five years of project development. This has attracted other states such as Singapore, which offered to provide assistance through its Information Fusion Centre (IFC). The IFC's support was requested by the Philippines and subsequently welcomed by other participating countries.¹¹ The patrols would involve:

“Continuous monthly rotation between the Indonesian, Philippine and Royal Malaysian Air forces; and A joint operation center and three military commands centers located in each littoral state to reduce the risk of sea incidents”¹²

Intelligence exchanges also have a long history among the neighbours. Beyond the usual high-level intelligence exchanges among ASEAN defence ministry personnel, arrangements were already in place for passing on operational intelligence. An example of such initiative is the inaugural ASEAN Militaries Analyst-to-Analyst Intelligence Exchange held in Manila in September 2011. The annual event gathers together analysts and subject matter experts; serving as a venue for analysts' interaction, connectivity and collaboration.

Something Older: Pre-colonial Roots of Sulu Sea Insecurity

These multilateral security arrangements exist within the context of both ASEAN-level and bilateral level linkages. Incremental changes in security policy appear to be the norm even with the shock brought about by the Marawi siege. The existence of formal mechanisms to secure the Sulu Sea by the turn of the century was therefore merely a reflection of the triggers of insecurity. Piracy and slave trading can be traced back to the pre-colonial patterns of conquest and commerce in maritime Southeast Asia. The colonial period saw the entrenchment of practices, partly as resistance to foreign dominance and partly as economic activities out of reach from taxation. What is decreed illicit by colonial authorities may be seen by communities as a legitimate economic production.

From 1903 to 1913, the Sultanate of Sulu based in Jolo Island off the coast of western Mindanao spearheaded resistance against American colonial authorities. Accomplished seafarers, the Tausug of Sulu carved out a prosperous sphere of influence—the Sulu Zone—with Jolo as one of the great centres of maritime trade in

11 - The IFC is a maritime security information-sharing structure located in Singapore's Changi Naval Base.

12 - For a detailed analysis of these challenges, see Zachary Abuza, “Trilateral Maritime Patrols in the Sulu Sea: Asymmetry in Need, Capability and Political Will”, *Maritime Security Review*, July 2016, <http://www.marsecreview.com/2016/07/sulu-sea-patrols-analysis/> (accessed May 2018).

Southeast Asia.¹³ Aside from maritime trade, slave raiding against Spanish-established settlements in the Central Philippines and piracy-at-sea were a significant source of the Tausugs' wealth. Organised resistance against the Americans only ended only after the pivotal battle of Bud Bagsak (1913).¹⁴

It was this long martial tradition that the ASG sought to co-opt for its cross-border sorties. The ASG factions involved in kidnappings operate similar to a cottage industry.¹⁵ The islands off the coast of western Mindanao host a number of individuals who abduct victims. Facilitators move kidnap victims to communities that hide them from government forces until a ransom is paid, euphemistically calling their cut of the illicit payoffs as «room and board» fees.¹⁶ Complicit local government officials then act as the negotiators between the kidnappers and the parties paying ransoms.

On the Mindanao mainland, the economic roots of the MG was similar to how the ASG is motivated by illicit financial gain. Prior to pledging allegiance to IS, the MG was known as an extortion group. Omar and Abdullah Maute's armed followers acted as enforcers for the clan matriarch Farhana Maute.¹⁷ Using imagery and the discourse of IS allowed the MG to increase its stature among other private militias in Lanao del Sur province. Opportunistic appropriation of the IS brand of jihadism progressed into linkages, which culminated in the Battle for Marawi.

Both the ASG and MG provide strong examples of how material considerations trump ideological commitment. Rather than ideology fuelling conflict in Mindanao, jihadism acts as a rationalisation for violence. Financial motivations by Mindanao-based militants are glossed over by a superficial veneer of adherence to the idea of the caliphate project espoused by IS. Recruitment into the MG was often a financial decision based on promises of monthly allowances for would-be militants.¹⁸ Maintenance of specific economic rights are the overarching driver of conflict in Mindanao's recorded

history.¹⁹ Discourses of religious and ethnic strife were the effect rather than the cause of conflict.

In short, the central government's inability to provide political autonomy and economic development incentivised the emergence of non-state armed groups. The MG and the ASG are just modern manifestations of groups that contest control from the state and tap into inchoate notions of resistance by local communities.



Old Meets New? Considering Non-Ideological Approaches to the Sulu Sea

The Battle of Marawi has brought to fore the discourse of countering violent extremism (CVE) among security stakeholders in the Philippines. Before the notion of IS became known in the Philippines, rebels and other non-state armed groups are simply considered as 'recruits' or individuals 'agitated' or 'mobilised'. Radicalisation, which implies an internal psychological process within an individual, only came into vogue recently. Instead, the AFP and other law enforcement agencies saw militants as existing within a permissive milieu—correctly situating acts of violence within a dysfunctional politico-economic system.

Manila has not seriously investigated and espoused a nuanced understanding of jihadism in Mindanao unfortunately. The Filipino policy response under Duterte has veered from military operations to policies framed through the lens of “countering violent extremism (CVE)” – mostly involving efforts to counter jihadist propaganda and indoctrination. CVE framing tends to oversimplify political and socio-economic factors that underpin Mindanao's ongoing conflict to the single cause—jihadist ideology. The dominance of CVE discourse is likely to render the Philippines policy in Mindanao ineffective.

Ideology is a heuristic for the instances of illicit economic activity and ostensibly political violence by groups in Mindanao. Material considerations matter more as motivations for militant groups like the MG and/or the ASG. Fixation on counter-narratives and contesting their ideological products may end up missing the point. It may also inadvertently exacerbate the legitimacy crisis that states face on the one hand, and militant groups exploit on the other.

Government's effort to promote Muslim clerics it views as “moderate”, for example, may further alienate a populace that derides them as mere mouthpieces. Strategic communications campaigns to counter extremist content on social media do not resolve the real-world issues such as dysfunctional politics and economic deprivation that jihadists tap to win recruits. 19 - Joseph Franco, “The Philippines: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front – A Pragmatic Power Structure?” in *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition*, eds. Michelle A. Hughes and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2016), <http://cco.ndu.edu/Publications/Publication-View/Article/780183/chapter-7-the-philippines-the-moro-islamic-liberation-front-a-pragmatic-power-s/> (accessed May 2018).

13 - James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898* (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2007).

14 - Charles Byler, “Pacifying the Moros: American Military Government in the Southern Philippines, 1899-1913”, *Military Review*, May-June 2005, www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/byler.pdf (accessed May 2018).

15 - Gabriel Dominguez, “Abu Sayyaf ‘seeking global attention’ with hostage kill threat” *Deutsche Welle*, 25 September 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/abu-sayyaf-seeking-global-attention-with-hostage-kill-threat/a-17954921> (accessed May 2018).

16 - Joseph Franco, “Islamic State and Southern Philippines: Tenuous links with militants” *RSIS Commentaries*, 12 September 2014, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CO14181.pdf> (accessed May 2018).

17 - Raju Gopalakrishnan and Manuel Mogato, “The Mautes of the Philippines: from monied family to Islamic State” *Reuters*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-matriarch-idUSKBN19E0A9> (accessed June 2018).

18 - Tom Allard, “Looted cash, gold helps Islamic State recruit in Philippines” *ABS-CBN News*, 23 January 2018, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/01/23/18/looted-cash-gold-helps-islamic-state-recruit-in-philippines> (accessed May 2018).

The same can be said of the various “preventing extremism” forums, youth leadership camps, and inter-faith rallies that are organised by the national government and its local government units.

Reorienting the AFP’s human security-centered counterinsurgency doctrine to a more adversarial approach might lead them to view Abu Sayyaf or Maute Group recruits as simply “radicalised” and irredeemable. Radicalisation discourse also risks implicitly casting all Muslim youths as potential enemies. It takes the onus off the state to address the dysfunctional local politics and illicit economies that swell the ranks of jihadist groups.

Militancy in Mindanao and consequently, the insecurity it stokes is therefore a complex issue that cannot be addressed by CVE alone. The decades-long secessionist struggle by Filipino Muslims is a self-perpetuating narrative that will outlast and outlive any contrived state-led CVE programme. Manila cannot afford to appear as picking winners. Community or religious leaders deemed by the populace as co-opted by the government will only create more fodder for militants. Narratives that contest jihadism or other extremisms in Mindanao should be allowed to emerge organically. All voices must be local for narratives to gain traction and legitimacy, ultimately displacing extremist content.

Taking this more hands-off approach means that government should prioritise the creation of a nurturing milieu. Breaking the vicious cycle of violence on the one hand and the dysfunctional political economy of Mindanao on the other requires improvements in material living conditions. Duterte’s signing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) is an opportunity for Manila and its allies to foster a narrative of progress. More importantly, it would allow greater political autonomy and more equitable wealth sharing between the Bangsamoro and the national government. Cautious optimism is however needed, given emerging criticisms over the delayed passage of the BOL along with the perceived watering down of some of its provisions.

Similar to how security mechanisms follow rather than lead patterns of economic and political activities, the same approach can be pursued to effect positive material changes to quality life in Mindanao. Even sans the BOL, Manila should leverage upon its multilateral relationships with parties with interests in the Sulu Sea. Fostering commerce could displace the illicit economies and dysfunctional politics that persist in and around the Sulu Seas. Rather than looking at the waters as barriers for interaction, perhaps policymakers should look at the Sulu Sea as a connective medium.

Whether the Duterte Administration is deft enough to handle the intricacies of multilateral engagements remains unclear; given the President’s tendency to pursue only bilateral relationships with an increasingly small set of foreign partners.



Conclusion

Securing the Sulu Sea requires the close cooperation of states surrounding it. Given the complexity it poses, the involvement of other maritime powers outside of the region should be welcomed and fostered. Multilateral approaches to transnational security in the Sulu Sea could be a counterweight to hegemonic tendencies that may emerge in the Asia-Pacific region. The Mindanao issue is an example of the limits of militarised or securitised approaches to internal conflict.

Non-kinetic approaches should be used to complement the kinetic approaches used to defeat insurgency. Rather than considering them as separate thrusts, it must be realised that both are complementing sides of a comprehensive strategy. Economic development and political empowerment in Mindanao denies militants legitimacy. In turn, a more stable and secure environment allows for the entrenchment of a positive peace. Rather than being reacting to sudden strategic crises or tactical-level sortie by militants, transnational security in the Sulu Sea would be better attained by proactively going after the roots of conflict.