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OCCASIONAL
PAPER

Non-Traditional Threats and Maritime Domain Awareness in the Tri-Border Area of Southeast Asia

The Coast Watch System of the Philippines

Angel Rabasa, Peter Chalk

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Preface

The tri-border area (TBA) between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia has been identified as a key hub of terrorist and related criminal activity in Southeast Asia. This geographical space is a well-known transit zone for weapons, explosives, and personnel, as well as a principal logistical corridor for local and transnational terrorist groups. The U.S. government has devoted considerable resources to promoting maritime security initiatives in this region and, through a variety of capacity-building efforts, has been at the forefront of underwriting initiatives in each of the three countries. This approach has necessarily been country-specific, with an eye toward developing solutions that uniquely fit each nation. However, the ultimate goal has been to encourage cooperation and interoperability, both among the recipient states and with the United States.

One of the most interesting collaborative initiatives is the evolving Coast Watch System (CWS) in the Philippines. Originally designed to improve maritime domain awareness in the Sulu and Celebes Seas, the concept has now been extended to cover the entire Philippine archipelago. This occasional paper analyzes the security environment in the TBA; evaluates the CWS and the challenges it has yet to overcome; and considers the prospects for an initiative to eventually form the basis of an integrated system of maritime security that would tie together the three states that converge in the TBA—Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

The main purpose of this document is to act as a building block to guide further work on how best to establish an effective and viable system of regional maritime security architecture in this sensitive but understudied part of the world. Further analysis on maritime domain awareness (MDA) efforts by Malaysia and Indonesia would usefully complement this study.

This research was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community. The document should be of interest to the national security community, as well as academics, analysts, and informed members of the public interested in Southeast Asian security issues.

For more information on the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center, see http://www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/isdp.html or contact the director (contact information is provided on the web page).

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Summary

The tri-border area (TBA) of Southeast Asia comprises the territory and territorial seas of three states—the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This zone constitutes a single geopolitical space that affects the political stability of the larger Southeast Asian maritime domain. Although long-standing ties of commerce, navigation, and settlement across the Celebes and Sulu Seas facilitate commerce and social relations among the populations of the region, these same links are also conducive to transnational dissident, terrorist, and criminal activity.

With vast tracts of inhospitable terrain that lie effectively outside the central administrative purview and control of the three littoral states, the region offers an environment in which terrorists and criminals alike can remain hidden from national law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies. These conditions are most pronounced in Mindanao and its outlying islands, where long-standing ethno-national, ideological, and religious conflicts have served to exacerbate the void in governance.

Current trends point to a significant improvement in the overall security situation in the TBA. The Indonesia-based terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has suffered significant fragmentation and attrition as a result of a loss of popular support and the elimination of many of its top operational commanders. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)—the focus of U.S. counterterrorism in the Philippines—no longer enjoys a unified central leadership and exists more as a loosely coordinated band of roving gangs under individual commanders active in the Sulu archipelago.

The losses suffered by JI and the ASG have resulted in an attenuated militant presence in the southern Philippines and, hence, have contributed to a decline in the overall terrorist threat in the TBA. That said, maritime awareness in and around the Sulu archipelago remains low and could still facilitate the designs of criminals and resurgent insurgent groups. To offset this possibility, as well as to capitalize on the present improved situation in the region, the Philippines is spearheading moves to promote and enhance a transparent and effective institutional means of coastal surveillance in and around the TBA.

Central to these efforts is the Coast Watch System (CWS), a collaborative initiative involving the United States, Australia, and the Philippines. The CWS aims to (1) develop a common operating picture of the maritime domain in the Philippines; (2) collect, consolidate, and integrate all data relevant to maritime security; and (3) provide real-time information for the purposes of cueing, locating, interdicting, apprehending, and prosecuting those who engage in illegal maritime activities. The Maritime Research Information Center (MRIC) in Manila coordinates the system on a 24/7 basis. The MRIC is primarily responsible for compiling strategic threat assessments (which are posted on a dedicated website that has been operational since December 2010) and providing an informed, unified picture of the maritime environment in the Philippines.

The CWS will eventually consist of 20 offshore platforms that will have both surveillance and interdiction capabilities. At the time of this writing in March 2012, 12 were fully operational. Another two were in the final stages of development, and three remained works in progress. The current CWS plan calls for all 20 to be running by the time the project is completed.

If it evolves as intended, the CWS will form the basis of an integrated system of maritime security that ties together the three prominent littoral states in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. However, the CWS confronts an array of challenges. These include (1) a dearth of human and physical assets; (2) the absence of necessary protocols for trilateral agreements between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia; (3) insufficient key stakeholder buy-in; (4) poor interagency coordination; (5) shortcomings in the logistical asset-maintenance chain; and (6) questionable human-sourced intelligence assets.

The CWS has the potential to play a significant role in helping to augment MDA and border security in the Philippines and in the larger tri-border area. The initiative has been universally endorsed in the United States and Australia, is generally welcomed by the Philippine armed forces, and represents a cost-effective means for countering maritime transnational threats. The system's future will depend on the ability and willingness of Manila to sustain stations that are up and running, ensure proper integration and connectivity for those that are nearing completion, and acquire necessary equipment, such as long-range surveillance platforms and sensors. Just as important, the CWS must necessarily evolve beyond the Philippine Navy–centric character that it currently exhibits if the system is to fulfill the type of comprehensive maritime domain awareness that it is supposed to engender.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to express their gratitude to those who extended their cooperation to this project. In particular, we would like thank the staff of the Philippine Navy and the Maritime Research Information Center (MRIC) in Manila who met with us and explained the objectives, plans, and operation of the system. We also wish to thank RAND research assistant Stephen Worman for his geospatial work; our reviewers, RAND associate political scientist Molly Dunigan and Rupert Herbert-Burns, director of Triton Consulting, for their valuable critiques of the manuscript; our editor, Miriam Polon; and our assistant, Christina Dozier, for her help with the preparation of the report.

Abbreviations

AOR	area of responsibility
ARMM	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
CWS	Coast Watch System
DI	*Darul Islam* (House of Islam)
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IED	improvised explosive device
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
LSV	logistics support vessel
MDA	maritime domain awareness
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MRIC	Maritime Research Information Center
NPA	New People's Army
PCG	Philippine Coast Guard
PN	Philippine Navy
PNP	Philippine National Police
ReCAAP	Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia
ReCAAP/ISC	ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre
RSIM	Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement
TBA	tri-border area

CHAPTER ONE

Geospatial and Demographic Characteristics of the Tri-Border Area

Introduction

As the name indicates, the tri-border area (TBA) of Southeast Asia comprises the territory and territorial seas of three littoral states—the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Figure 1.1). The region constitutes a single geopolitical space that affects the political stability of the larger Southeast Asian maritime domain. Although there are long-standing ties of commerce, navigation, and settlement across the Celebes and Sulu Seas that facilitate commerce and social relations among the populations of the region, these same links are also conducive to transnational dissident, terrorist, and criminal activity.

This occasional paper discusses the security challenges of the TBA and describes the Coast Watch System (CWS), a collaborative initiative involving the United States, Australia, and the Philippines. The CWS concept faces a number of challenges, but if it evolves as intended, it will form the basis of an integrated system of maritime domain awareness (MDA) that effectively ties the Philippines to the two other prominent littoral states in Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia. Examining the CWS and the manner in which it is being developed thus provides a useful case for assessing what a future MDA system might look like in the wider TBA.

Characteristics of the Tri-Border Area

The TBA was described in an earlier RAND study as an ungoverned maritime space.[1] With vast tracts of inhospitable terrain and areas that lie effectively outside the administrative purview and central control of the three littoral states, the region offers an environment in which terrorists and criminals alike can remain hidden from national law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies. These conditions are most pronounced in Mindanao and its outlying islands, where long-standing ethno-national, ideological, and religious conflicts have served to exacerbate voids in governance.

Several ethnic and social groups in the TBA transcend (and pay little heed to) national borders. The Bajaus, for instance, are traditionally a nomadic, seafaring people scattered along the coast of the state of Sabah in eastern Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines.

[1] See Angel Rabasa, Steven Boraz, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Theodore W. Karasik, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Kevin A. O'Brien, and John E. Peters, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-561-AF, 2007, Chapter Eight, "Case Study: The Sulawesi-Mindanao Arc."

Figure 1.1
Tri-Border Area of Southeast Asia

SOURCE: Central Intelligence Agency.
RAND *OP372-1.1*

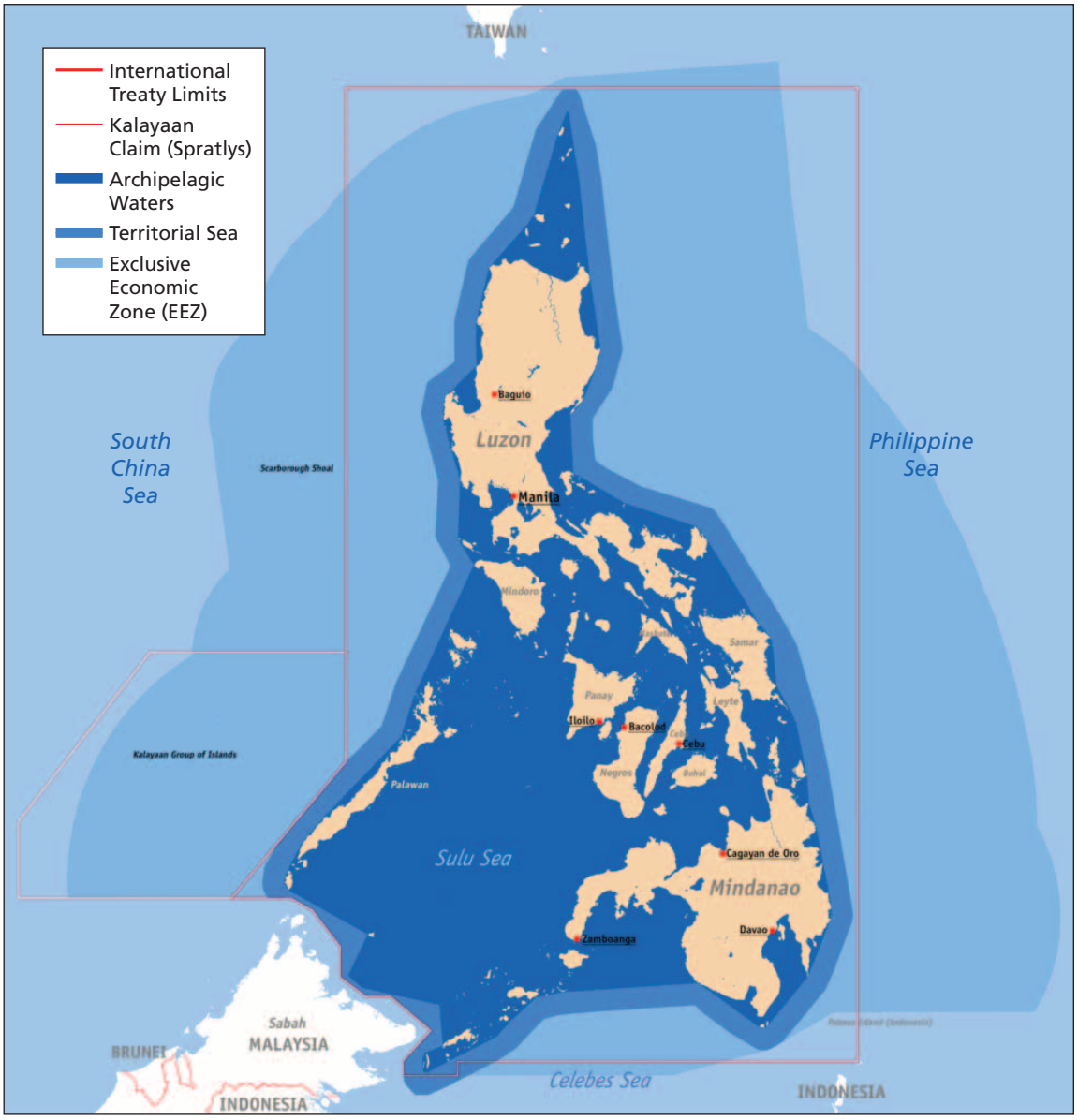
Although they are native to the southern Philippines, over the past 50 years they have steadily migrated to Sabah, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) and are now the largest ethnic group in Sabah. They share close similarities with the Samal, one of 13 Moro ethnolinguistic communities in the southern Philippines.[2] Another group, the Bugis, originated in southwestern Sulawesi and migrated to the Malay Peninsula (where they established the Sultanate of Selangor in the 1700s) and to what is today Kalimantan and Sabah.

Important areas in the TBA are contested among the littoral states. Spatiality and jurisdiction have considerable impact on margins of sovereign control, legal rights of usage and transit, practical limitations of surveillance capacity, and areas of likely contest and possible

[2] Many of the illegal immigrants from the Philippines in Sabah originate from either the Bajau or Samal ethnic group. See "Bajau of Sabah," 2003.

cooperation.[3] The Philippines, with a coastline longer than Australia's, claims an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 2.27 million square kilometers (see Figure 1.2). As former Filipino diplomat Rodolfo Severino noted in a recent book, "Philippine law-enforcement agencies have not been sure of what to allow and what to prohibit where, particularly by way of sea passage,

Figure 1.2
Exclusive Economic Zone Boundaries of the Tri-Border Area



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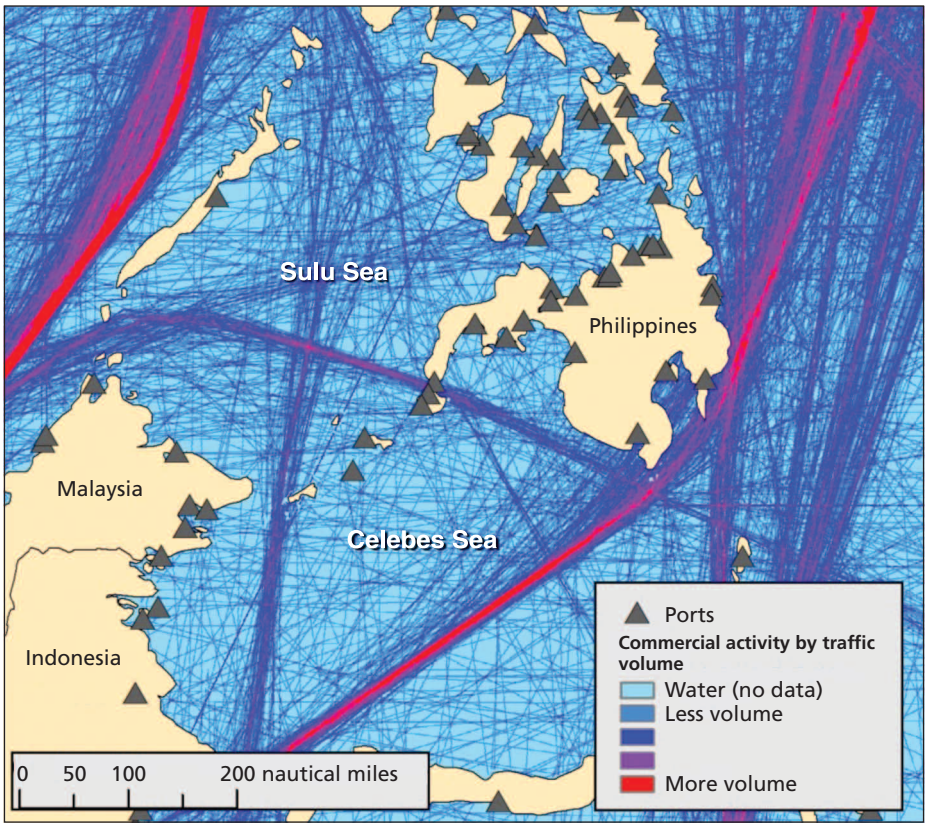
RAND *OP372-1.2*

[3] Rupert Herbert-Burns, review of manuscript, January 2012.

overflight, fishing activities, and environmental protection."[4] The International Court of Justice's (ICJ's) award of Sipadan and Ligitan islands (also claimed by Indonesia and the Philippines) to Malaysia in 2002 left the sovereignty of Unarang Rock and the maritime boundary in the Ambalat Oil Block in the Celebes Sea in dispute; the ICJ decision prompted Indonesia to assert claims to and to establish a presence on its smaller outer islands.[5]

Important shipping lanes pass from the Makassar Strait between Sulawesi and Borneo through the Celebes Sea to East Asia. These routes include one across the Sulu Sea to the Surigao Strait (between Mindanao and Leyte), used by ships traveling between Southeast Asia and the Pacific; across the Sulu Sea to the Balabac Strait (between Palawan and Sabah) and the Mindoro Strait (west of Mindoro island), used by ships traveling between Australia and southern China; and one east of Mindoro and then across the San Bernardino Strait to the Pacific Ocean. The Philippines also has a complex network of inter-island shipping with a high incidence of shipping disasters and piracy.[6] The most important ports are shown in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3
Primary Shipping Lanes and Ports



SOURCE: National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis. Used with permission.
RAND *OP372-1.3*

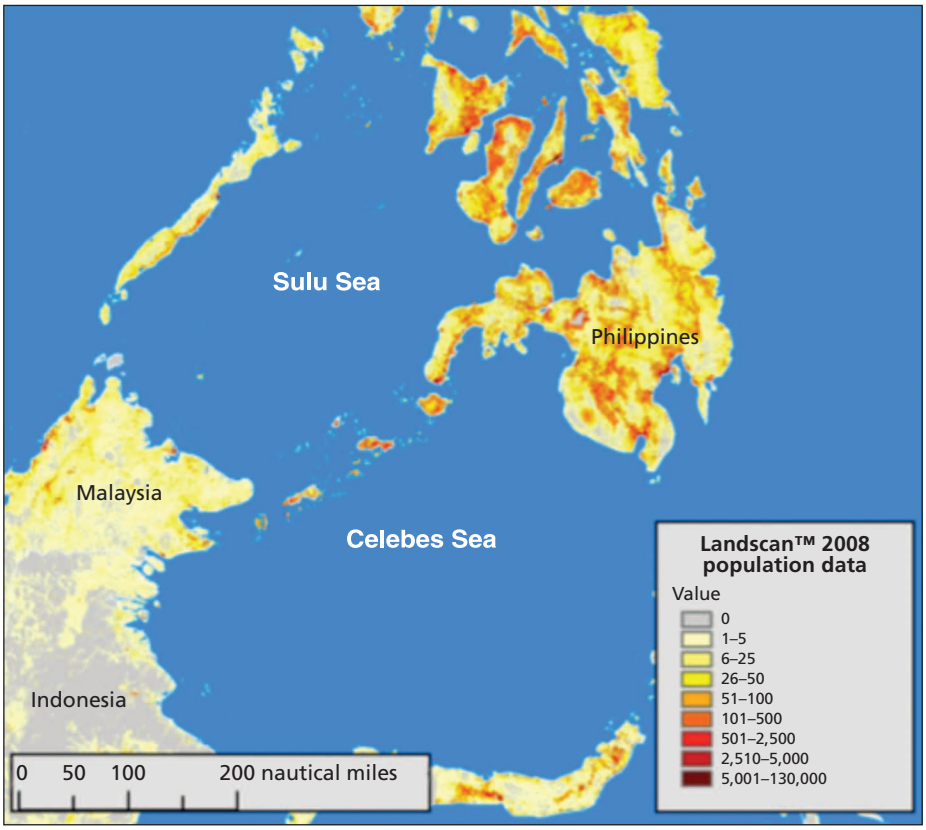
[4] Ellen Tordesillas, "Diplomat Severino's Book Takes on National Territorial Debate," VERA Files, January 11, 2011.

[5] Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Disputes: International," 2012.

[6] Sam Bateman, Joshua Ho, and Jane Chan, "Good Order at Sea in Southeast Asia," Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, RSIS Policy Paper, April 2009.

According to 2008 data, the population of western Mindanao, Palawan, and the Sulu archipelago was 14,350,000 inhabitants. Sabah's population was estimated at 2,630,000, and the estimated population of the Indonesian provinces bordering the Celebes Sea—Gorontalo, North Sulawesi, and East Kalimantan—was 4,580,000.[7] As shown in Figure 1.4, population density is highest in the southern Philippines. Most of the groups of concern in the security area operate in the southern Philippines and parts of Indonesia. However, the demographic makeup of Sabah and its proximity to Mindanao make it a suitable rear area for militants, who can blend into and develop support networks undetected among the large migrant population.[8]

Figure 1.4
Population Density



SOURCE: Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 2009.
RAND *OP372-1.4*

[7] Data from Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), LandScan™ 2008 data set, Oak Ridge, Tenn., 2009.

[8] In 2010, there were between 800,000 and 950,000 immigrants in Sabah, mostly Filipinos and Indonesians, including anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 illegal migrants, out of a total population of 2.3 million. Filipino settlement in Sabah was the result of several waves of migration that began in the 1960s and accelerated as the result of the conflict in Mindanao in the 1970s—many of the refugees settled in coastal towns like Sandakan and Tawau and maintained close ties with their kinsmen in the southern Philippines. See "Illegal Immigrants in Sabah: A Numbers Game," *Free Malaysia Today*, August 28, 2011.

CHAPTER TWO

Tri-Border Area Threat Assessment

Although there has been ethnic and religious strife in West and Central Kalimantan between indigenous Dayaks and Madurese immigrants[1] and in Central Sulawesi between Muslims and Christians,[2] the most persistent conflict has been in Mindanao. Violence in the Muslim areas of Mindanao derives from separatist sentiment on the part of the Muslim or Moro population, whose sense of separate identity has been sharpened by decades of assimilationist policies and Catholic transmigration from the central and northern Philippines.[3]

The political identity of the Moros was first established as a by-product of their struggle against Spanish colonialism; it was subsequently reaffirmed in resistance to the U.S. administration and finally in opposition to the predominantly Catholic Republic of the Philippines. Until the end of the 19th century, the sultanates in Sulu (Jolo) and Maguindanao fought intermittent wars against the Spanish and maintained diplomatic relations with the British and the Dutch. During the periods of American rule and after independence, Christians from other parts of the Philippines were encouraged to settle in Mindanao. As a result, the demographic balance in the southern Philippines was altered—from a Muslim majority at the end of the 19th century to a minority of the population today, with bitter concomitant conflicts emerging over land ownership. The resentment of the Moro population was compounded by government policies that the Moros perceived as inimical to their cultural, religious, and political traditions; inequitable income distribution; and widespread poverty. These have all combined to fuel a protracted insurgency that is still going on today.[4]

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[1] The worst violence occurred in the late 1990s, leaving hundreds of people dead, but tensions remain. "Ethnic-Based Conflict Continues to Haunt West Kalimantan," *Jakarta Post*, February 28, 2008.

[2] There was major violence between Muslim and Christian factions in the regency (district) of Poso between 1998 and 2001 until a peace agreement brokered by the Indonesian government was reached in 2001. After 2001, the violence involved periodic attacks by Muslim extremist attacks on Christians, local officials, and suspected informants. ICG, "Indonesia: Tackling Radicalism in Poso," Asia Briefing No. 75, January 22, 2008.

[3] In Mindanao and the adjacent islands, there are at least 13 distinct Moro ethno-linguistic groups. The most important groups on the main island of Mindanao are the Maranaos and the closely related Ilanun around Lake Lanao and the Maguindanao of Cotabato. In the Sulu archipelago, the main communities are the Tausugs on the island of Jolo, the Yakan of Basilan Island, the Samal in Tawi-Tawi, and the Jama Mapun of Cagayan de Sulu. Together, they constitute about 17 percent of the population of Mindanao (the rest are Christians, originally from the central and northern Philippines, and animistic indigenous peoples collectively known as Lumads). See Angel Rabasa, "Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists," Adelphi Paper No. 358, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003.

[4] See Patricio Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine State, 1900–1972,* Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000; Marites Danguilan Vitug and Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao,* Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affair and Institute for Popular Democracy (CSPPA-IPD), 2000; Patricio P. Diaz, *Understanding the Mindanao Conflict*, Davao City: MindaNews Publications, 2003.

The Spectrum of Armed Nonstate Actors in the Tri-Border Area

Regional Jihadists

For most of the first decade of the 21st century, the TBA was, and to some extent continues to be, a key logistical corridor for the now factionalized Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI—literally, "Islamic community") and its various offshoots. It has also been systematically exploited by the Sulu archipelago–based Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) to conduct acts of maritime terrorism, kidnappings, piracy, and other criminal activity. Finally the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—the largest Islamist organization in the southern Philippines—has periodically engaged in arms trafficking through the region.

According to Philippine military sources, there are currently no more than 40 and possibly as few as ten JI members in Mindanao and its outlying islands. The ability of JI to maintain its presence in the area will depend on the survival of the group's main body of strength in Indonesia (which remains questionable because of the losses of key personnel[5] and drops in popular support) and on the extent to which its cadres continue to have access to sanctuaries in the TBA.

Although JI had its roots and center of gravity in Indonesia, the formation of the group was influenced by global jihadi ideologies and was initially linked to al-Qaeda.[6] The origin of the organization and associated and splinter groups, such as *Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid* (Partisans of Monotheism) and *Takjim al-Qaeda Serambi Mekah* (al-Qaeda of the Veranda of Mecca), derive from *Darul Islam* (DI, or House of Islam). DI was an indigenous Indonesian movement that sought to create an Islamic state in Indonesia in the late 1940s and 1950s through the force of arms. Although the DI insurgency was effectively crushed by 1962, its militant network survived and continued to propagate jihadist ideology through associated *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools).

JI itself emerged as a clandestine entity sometime between 1993 and 1996, depending on the source quoted.[7] Its original founders were Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, two figures associated with the radical Pesantren al-Mu'min in central Java, who had fled to Malaysia to escape persecution by the Suharto regime. According to its manifesto, "The General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah" (*Pedoman Umum Perjuangan-Al-Jama-ah Al-Islamiya*), JI was to be organized with a distinct territorial structure consisting of four *mantiqis* (regional groups) that covered all of Southeast Asia, as well as Australia. The region with which this study is concerned—Sabah, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and the southern Philippines—came under the sphere of Mantiqui III, which served as a major logistical cell for JI. This regional command was responsible for the procurement of equipment and explosives and, more important, for forging links with Moro insurgent and terrorist groups in Mindanao.[8]

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[5] The group's spiritual guide, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, was sentenced to 15 years in prison by a Jakarta court in June 2011 for his role in setting up the terrorist training camp in Aceh. See "Ba'asyir Gets 15 Years in Prison," *Jakarta Post*, June 16, 2011.

[6] The link was through its chief of operations, Riduan Isamuddin (alias Hambali), who was also the only Southeast Asian member of the al-Qaeda shura. Hambali was captured in Thailand in 2003 and is currently in U.S. custody.

[7] Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Counter-Terrorism Measures in Southeast Asia: How Effective Are They?* Manila: De La Sale University, Yuchengco Center, 2009.

[8] Elena Pavlova, "From Counter-Society to Counter-State: Jemaah Islamiyah According to PUPJI," Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, RSIS Working Paper 117, November 14, 2006.

Transnational Linkages

As suggested above, the southern Philippines have been a critically important rear area for JI, as both a sanctuary and a logistical base outside the reach of Indonesian authorities. Many of the group's early contacts in the region were fostered through the work of Nasir Abas, a Malaysian national who had been recruited by Sungkar to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, Abbas was sent to Mindanao to train the personal guard of MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat.[9]

JI also played a formative role in establishing the MILF's Special Operations Group, which was later used to conduct unconventional urban sabotage and terrorist operations. In return, Salamat allowed JI to establish a dedicated training facility, Wakalah Hudaibiyah, within the grounds of the MILF's headquarters, Camp Abubakar. The original intention was to use the site to develop a three-year program for honing the skills of senior JI instructors who would then oversee six-month courses for JI "cadets." However, only two graduating classes completed the three-year training module before Camp Abubakar was overrun by the Philippines military in 2000.[10]

After Camp Abubakar fell, JI moved its principal training site to Jabal Quba on Mt. Cararao, in Maguindanao province. According to the International Crisis Group, by early 2007 a small group of instructors was receiving regular monthly payments from the JI leadership in Indonesia. Although the arrest of several senior members between March and June of that year disrupted this funding, it did not completely terminate it. The widespread consensus was that the JI trainers remained in the region and were continuing to conduct courses under the protection of the MILF (or sympathetic MILF commanders) so long as these activities did not adversely affect the evolving peace process between the MILF and the Philippine government.[11]

JI operatives and recruits made the journey from Indonesia to safe houses and training camps in the Philippines through Sandakan, in Sabah. However, the need to transit maritime spaces created vulnerabilities for terrorists. This became apparent in September 2003, when six Indonesians were captured off the coast of Sabah. The group was allegedly en route to meet with senior JI figure Abu Dujana to discuss the future leadership of Mantiqui III after the arrest of Nasir Abas following the first Bali bombings. Another group was picked up in 2003, this time in Semarang (Indonesia); it had reportedly been dispatched to the southern Philippines for training but spent time in Sandakan before and after coming back from Mindanao. In 2006, Malaysian authorities detained eleven more militants, two of whom were Filipinos.[12] There have no reported arrests of JI members transiting the region for the last several years, possibly suggesting a reduction in the group's regional activity.[13]

Following the 9/11 attacks, MILF downgraded its ties to JI. Since then, the latter's main partner in the southern Philippines has been the al-Harakat al-Islamiyah Islamic Movement). Better known as the Abu Sayyaf Group, this organization is thought to have provided pro-

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[9] Author's interview with Nasir Abas, Jakarta, March 2009.

[10] ICG, "Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia: Damaged, but Still Dangerous," Asia Report No. 63, August 16, 2003.

[11] ICG, "The Philippines: Counter-Insurgency vs. Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao," Asia Report No. 152, May 14, 2008.

[12] "AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] on the Lookout for JI Splinter Cell in Mindanao," *Zambo Times*, June 15, 2006.

[13] This interpretation would be consistent with the reduction of the reported number of foreign militants in Mindanao, as discussed in this paper.

tection for key JI operatives in Mindanao in exchange for weapons training, particularly the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and religious and spiritual guidance.[14]

Among the JI militants who are believed to have taken refuge with the ASG, the best known are Joko Pitono (a.k.a. Dulmatin), Umar Patek, and Zulkifli bin Hir, all of whom reportedly remained in contact with associates in Indonesia. The first, who was killed during a police raid in Pamulang, Indonesia, in March 2010,[15] is alleged to have been the mastermind of the first Bali bombings, as well as of several attacks on churches in Indonesia. The second, who was captured in Abbottabad, Pakistan, while allegedly waiting to meet Osama bin Laden in January 2011,[16] was a protégé of the late Azahari Husin (one of JI's most skilled explosives experts) and a highly proficient and experienced electronics engineer. The third, who was reportedly killed in early 2012 but may still be alive, is thought to oversee all aspects of military ordinance for regional terrorist attacks. The three men are believed to have greatly enhanced the ASG's operational tactics, particularly in the areas of IED construction, placement, and detonation.[17]

Domestic Terrorist/Criminal Networks—The Abu Sayyaf Group

According to Philippine military sources, the ASG currently consists of around 100 members, most of who are heavily involved in criminal activity—largely extortion, but also piracy, weapons trafficking, and illegal logging. There is no evidence of central direction, and the group is composed mainly of disparate bands operating independently.[18]

At its inception, the ASG was closely linked to al-Qaeda. Abdurajak Janjalani, a veteran of the jihad in Afghanistan, established the group in 1991 with the support of bin Laden's brother-in-law Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, who ran a branch of the Saudi-funded Islamic International Relief Organization in the Philippines. The ASG's home ground is the Sulu archipelago, primarily the islands of Basilan and Jolo (Figure 2.1). Former members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) formed the nucleus of the group, leaving their parent organization in opposition to its willingness to conclude a peace agreement with the government of Fidel Ramos in 1996 (the so-called Davao Consensus).

Although the ASG was originally conceived as a domestic Islamist entity, Janjalani quickly tied the group to the regional and global supremacy of Islam through armed struggle. Toward that end, the ASG paralleled its local anti-Christian agenda in Mindanao with an effort to foster concerted ties with international terrorist movements. Evidence of these traditional ambitions first emerged in 1995 when five ASG cells were directly implicated in Operation Bojinka, a multipronged plot aimed at assassinating U.S. President William J. Clinton and Pope John Paul II, bombing Washington's embassies in Manila and Bangkok, and sabotaging American airliners flying trans-Pacific routes to Asia. The plan was hatched by Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center in New York. It was only

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[14] Author's interview with Maritime Research Information Center (MRIC) personnel, Quezon City, August 18, 2011.

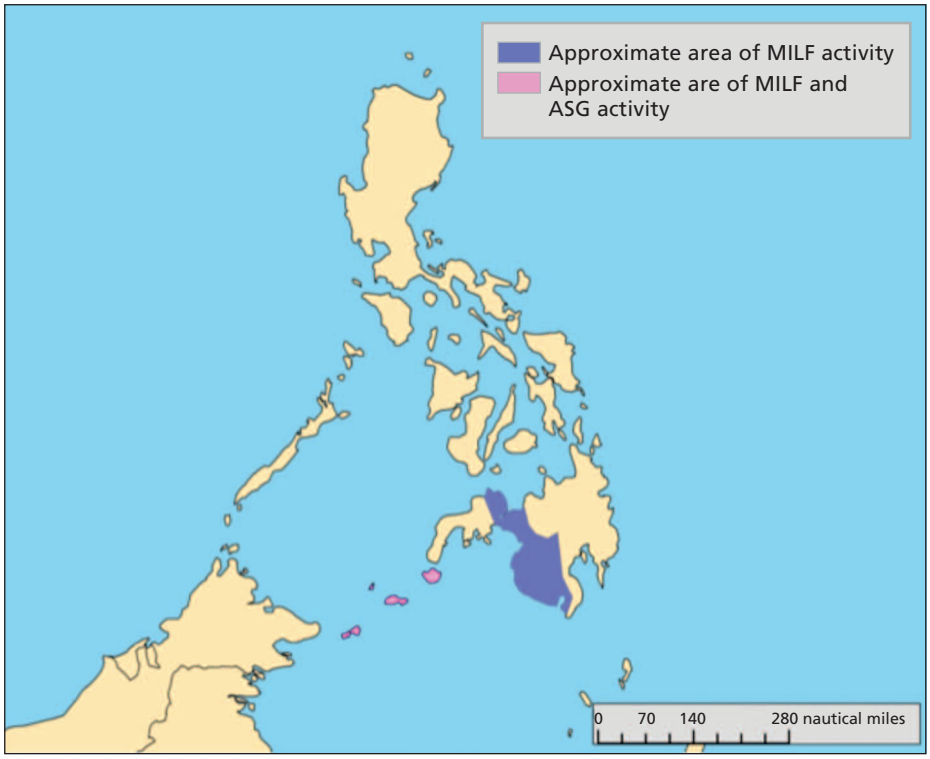
[15] Peter Gelling, "Suspect's Death Leads to Questions on Indonesia's Border Security," *New York Times*, March 10, 2010.

[16] "Why Was Bali Bomb Suspect in Bin Laden's Hideout City?" *Jakarta Globe*, May 5, 2011.

[17] ICG, "The Philippines: Counter-insurgency vs. Counter-Terrorism in Mindanao," p. 9; Peter Chalk, Angel Rabasa, William Rosenau, and Leanne Piggott, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-846-OSD, 2009, pp. 94–96.

[18] Author's interview with MRIC personnel, Quezon City, August 18, 2011.

Figure 2.1
Approximate Areas of Operations of the ASG and MILF



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foiled when volatile explosive compounds ignited a fire in the apartment that he was renting in Manila.[19] Although the scheme never materialized, it provided definitive evidence that the ASG had established both logistical and operational links with Islamist extremists based well outside the Philippines.

Following the disruption of Bojinka, however, the ASG's transnational jihadist fervor began to wither, further atrophying when Janjalani was killed in a shootout with police in 1998. His death proved to be a defining moment in the ASG's evolutionary history, triggering a leadership crisis that was followed by a wholesale loss of ideological and operational direction.[20]

The ASG's fortunes suffered a further setback after 9/11, when the United States initiated the "Balikatan" (literally "shoulder-to-shoulder") series of combined U.S.-Filipino military exercises and moved to substantially enhance the provision of counterinsurgency training to Philippine troops. This assistance, which was rendered as part of the Global War on Terror,

[19] See Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, pp. 50–51; Simon Elegant, "Asia's Own Osama," *Time Magazine*, April 1, 2002; Doug Struck, Howard Schneider, Karl Vick, and Peter Baker, "Borderless Network of Terror: Bin Laden Followers Reach Across Globe," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2011; and Anthony Spaeth, "Rumbles in the Jungle," *Time Magazine*, March 4, 2002. Although Yousef escaped the fire and managed to leave the Philippines without being arrested, he was detained in Pakistan in 1996 and subsequently extradited to the United States to stand trial for the World Trade Center bombing. He is currently serving a lifetime sentence for the crime.

[20] Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia,* p. 50.

seriously degraded the ASG's operational capabilities and triggered a rapidly escalating criminal degeneration within the ranks of the organization.

Although Abdurajak's brother and successor, Khaddafy Janjalani, managed to briefly revive the jihadist tradition in the ASG, he was killed in 2006 along with another senior commander and ideologue, Abu Sulaiman.[21] Since then there has been no single leader with either the religious or militant credentials to unite the group, which now exists as a loosely configured kidnap-for-ransom syndicate based on clan and family relationships.[22] Indeed, virtually all the civilian abductions that presently take place in the southern Philippines are the work of the ASG. Chinese are the main target (largely because their families generally do not contact the police and are willing to pay quickly), although Westerners have occasionally been seized.[23]

Despite concentrating much of its activity on land, the ASG's strong maritime tradition has necessarily prompted the group to carry numerous acts of violence at sea. While most of this activity has been relatively small-scale in nature—typically involving the detonation of IEDs against ships—at least one operation resulted in mass casualties: the bombing of *SuperFerry 14*. Executed in collaboration with JI and the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM)[24] and costing no more than $400 with a planning cycle of around two months, the attack left 116 people dead. It remains the most destructive maritime terrorist incident in history.[25]

The ASG has also engaged in extensive criminality at sea. It has frequently staged pirate attacks off Mindanao and nearby islands, especially between Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, Sulu, and the Zamboanga Peninsula. The group has traditionally enjoyed largely free rein in these waters, both because of the absence of joint maritime patrols in the region (due to interstate tension arising out of ongoing territorial disputes and issues of maritime sovereignty) and the difficulty of instituting a comprehensive monitoring regime of the extensive Philippine coastline. Between 1996 and the end of 2003, the ASG was responsible for around 11 percent of the 811 actual and attempted acts of piracy that were recorded in Southeast Asia.[26]

Besides piracy, the ASG has carried out a number of long-range seaborne kidnappings. One of the group's most audacious (and lucrative) operations was staged in April 2000, when militants seized 21 Western tourists and Asian resort workers from a Malaysian diving resort in

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[21] Richard Weitz, "Death of a Terrorist: Abu Sayyaf's Abu Sulaiman," *World Politics Review*, February 5, 2007.

[22] Author's discussions with Moro sources, Manila, January 2008.

[23] Author's interview with MRIC, Quezon City, August 18, 2011.

[24] The RSIM is a fanatical fringe element of Balik Islam composed of Christian converts to the Muslim faith. Its purpose is to establish a theocratic Muslim state across the entire Philippine archipelago in order to "rectify" what it regards as the artificial influx of Catholic influence first brought in by the Spanish and later consolidated by the United States. Although the RSIM enjoyed a relatively high operational profile during the early 2000s, it is now essentially a spent force as a result of the 2005 imprisonment of the group's leader (Ahmed Santos) and the capture of most of its members. According to Philippine sources, the RSIM currently numbers no more than 17 cadres and possibly less. Author interviews, Manila, January 2008.

[25] Peter Chalk, *The Maritime Dimension of International Security*: *Terrorism, Piracy and Challenges for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-697-AF, 2008, p. 26.

[26] Angel Rabasa, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O'Brien, and William Rosenau, *Beyond al-Qaeda: Part 2, The Outer Rings of the Terrorist Universe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-430-AF, 2006, pp. 112–113.

Sabah. The hostages were taken and held on the island of Jolo before eventually being released after being paid a ransom of $16 million that was reportedly brokered by Libya.[27]

Major Insurgent Movements

There are two major ongoing insurgencies: the Communist Party of the Philippines—New People's Army (CPP-NPA) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front—Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (MILF-BIAF). Of the two, the one that most affects the region under consideration is the latter.[28] The MILF has approximately 11,000 fighters, distributed among a number of base commands in western and central Mindanao (see Figure 2.1). After the breakdown of peace negotiations between the Manila government and the MILF in August 2008, several senior base commanders broke from the MILF central command. In 2010, one of these renegade commanders, Ameril Umbra Kato, set up his own separate armed organization, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The strength of the new group has been variously estimated at between 300 and 1,000 fighters. The group operates in North Cotabato, Maguindano, and the area around Liguasan Marsh, where three MILF base commands converge.[29]

Historical Overview of the Moro Separatist Movement

The Moro conflict began in 1972 after President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. The insurgency was led by the MNLF until 1996, the year the group's leader, Nur Misauri, signed a peace agreement with President Ramos. Since then, the MILF has assumed the mantle of the Moro struggle in the south of the country. The difference between the MNLF and MILF is not strictly religious, as many have argued, even if the former does hold a more secular worldview. Rather, it has to do with ethnic composition and geographic distribution: The MNLF has always been the dominant political organization among the Tausugs in the Sulu archipelago. By contrast, the MILF leadership comes from the Maguindanao and Maranao ethnolinguistic groups, which are the predominant Moro groups in western Mindanao. These distinctions are significant; they affect, for instance, the relationship between the MILF and the predominantly Tausug ASG and renegade MNLF factions.[30]

The main driver of the group's struggle after 1996 is the perception that the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)—a self-governing territorial zone set up as part of the 1996 peace agreement—is not a viable entity and does not reflect the true aspirations of the

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[27] Rabasa et al., *Beyond al-Qaeda: Part 2,* pp. 115–116. See also "Fears of the Hostage Takers," *The Economist*, August 26, 2000; "Libya Denies Ransom Offer for Hostages," *The Sacramento Bee*, August 13, 2000; "No More Ransoms," *The Economist*, June 2, 2001; and "Philippine Forces Continues All Out Attack on Rebels," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2000.

[28] The NPA acts as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. It was established in 1969 to wage a people's war in order to replace the current economic and political order in the Philippines. Although the organization is viewed as the country's main internal threat (because it operates nationally, has infiltrated numerous civic organizations, and seeks to overthrow the existing government), it has only partial relevance to threat contingencies in the TBA. Most of the NPA's activity is land-based and, while it has occasionally used the maritime environment to transport and smuggle weapons, most of these shipments occur in and around the Ligusan Marsh of Mindanao.

[29] Jacob Zenn, "Rebel with a Cause in Mindanao," *Asia Times,* September 13, 2011.

[30] It should be noted that there are indications suggesting that these ethnic distinctions may be beginning to fade; for instance, the MILF has established a base command—the 114th—on the island of Basilan where previously there had been no MILF presence. Pro-MILF Moro sources attribute this to the decline of the MNLF as a relevant political force. Author's discussions with Moro sources, Manila, January 2008.

Moro population in Mindanao. Two features of the ARMM, in particular, are criticized. First, the area is not contiguous; it does not incorporate all the provinces where Muslims have traditionally been a majority and excludes certain major towns, such as Cotabato City and Isabela in Jolo. Second, the ARMM government does not control the natural resources of the region and does not have the authority to collect its own taxes, which makes it financially dependent on subsidies from Manila.[31]

Although the MILF is mostly a land-based entity, it has utilized maritime conveyance to transport weapons, personnel, and battle-related materiel. Most of these resources are channeled to the group's bases via the TBA through the highly porous borders of Sabah—often referred to as the militants' "back door" to the Philippines. In addition, under the tenure of the MILF's founder, Hashim Salamat, the organization was instrumental in supplying explosives to JI for terrorist attacks in Indonesia, including the 2002 Bali bombings that killed over 200 people.[32] Again, these explosives were generally smuggled from Mindanao in shipments that passed through the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Unlike the ASG, the MILF has largely eschewed maritime criminal activity, such as piracy. That said, there have been periodic claims that the group has worked with Abu Sayyaf traffickers, as well as locally based kidnap-for-ransom syndicates, such as the Pentagon Gang.[33]

Current State of the Moro Insurgency

Although MILF's original program called for the creation of an independent state, the group has been prepared to negotiate an arrangement short of secession if a greater degree of autonomy is granted to Muslim Mindanao. This more accommodating stance came clearly into focus on January 20, 2003, when Hashim Salamat sent a letter to President George W. Bush in which he reaffirmed the MILF's commitment to a negotiated political settlement of the conflict and invited the United States to assist in this process. Although Salamat died of natural causes in 2003, the trajectory he initiated was continued and, indeed, expanded by his more politically astute successor, Al Haj Murad Ebrahim.[34]

Several rounds of talks between the MILF and Manila have since been held, and most outstanding issues between the two sides have been resolved. Although negotiations were suspended in August 2008 after the Philippine Supreme Court declared that the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, which laid the foundations of a final settlement, was unconstitutional, they resumed in June 2009. Two months later, the current president, Benigno Aquino III, met with Murad in Tokyo, and both agreed to fast-track the process, building on a relatively benign security climate that has not witnessed any major clashes between the MILF and armed forces for two years.[35]

The main complicating variable in the current peace talks is the attitude and actions of so-called renegade MILF commanders. Their potential to act as "spoilers" became clearly evi-

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[31] Author interviews, Manila, March 2006.

[32] Author interviews with Singaporean security officials, Singapore, July 2005. For more on MILF-JI operational cooperation, see Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

[33] Author interviews, Manila, March 2006.

[34] Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, pp. 38–39.

[35] Tarra Quismundo, "Aquino Meets with Moro Rebel Leader in Tokyo," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 5, 2011; author's discussions with AFP, Manila, January 2008.

dent in August 2008, when three senior base commanders—Abdurahman Macapaar (a.k.a. Commander Bravo) of the 102nd, Ameril Umbra Kato of the 105th, and Salim Pangalian of the 107th—launched unauthorized attacks on Christian villages throughout western Mindanao. Although the main MILF leadership announced that the trio would be court-martialed, it was neither unwilling nor able to surrender them as the Philippine government demanded.[36]

As noted above, Kato set up his own separate armed organization, the BIFF. While there have been periodic armed clashes between mainstream MILF units[37] and the BIFF, certain analysts believe that Murad is using Kato's splinter group as leverage in the negotiations with Manila. According to this line of reasoning, the MILF chairman is calculating that the current government will show greater flexibility in talks with his group if he can show that the alternative is to empower Moro hardliners.[38] There is no evidence to back these speculations, however. Moreover, Commander Bravo has since returned to the MILF and, in the spring of 2011, was reported to be leading an initiative to persuade Kato to rejoin the fold.[39]

A matter of some controversy is the relationship between the MILF and foreign terrorist groups. As noted above, there is a well-documented history of cooperation between the group and JI. After 9/11, however, the MILF leadership conspicuously moved to distance itself from the Indonesian-based network, recognizing that any such association would merely hurt the interests of the organization.[40]

The issue of radical ties and of the very character of the conflict in Mindanao is related to the question of the cohesion of the MILF. A number of renegade MILF commanders are believed to have provided haven to JI and ASG militants, and there are allegations that at least some wanted terrorists remain under their protection. Arguably more serious have been signs of growing dissent within mainstream MILF units themselves, with several engaging in armed clashes that have typically been triggered by land disputes. According to government sources, one conflict between members of the 105th and the 104th base commands in July 2011 left 12 dead and resulted in the displacement of 7,980 persons from six barangays (districts) in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat, according to government sources.[41] Earlier in the year, the leaders of the 108th and 109th base commands in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao, were involved in a similar rido (clan conflict or vendetta). Philippine authorities have called on the MILF to put a halt to

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[36] "MILF's Commander Bravo Strikes Again," *Inquirer News*, August 19, 2008. The Arroyo government subsequently designated the three renegade commanders and their followers as the Lawless MILF Group in an attempt to distinguish them from the regular MILF (which the administration insisted was not the enemy). When peace talks resumed in 2009, Bravo, Kato, and Pangalian were all excluded.

[37] One notable clash in 2011 between the MILF's 106th base command and BIFF in Datu Piang, Maguindanao, left 14 dead and displaced more than 700 families from the area.

[38] Zenn, "Rebel with a Cause in Mindanao"; "99.99% of 105th, 108th Base Commands Support MILF Peace Strategy," *luwaran.net*, February 8, 2011; Florante S. Solmerin, Joseph Jubelag, and Joyce Pangco Panares, "Manila, MILF Begin New Talks Amid Fresh Fighting," *Manila Standard Today*, September 15, 2008.

[39] "Bravo Asks Kato to Return to BIAF," *Mindanews*, April 26, 2011.

[40] This was explicitly reaffirmed by Ghazali Jaafar, the MILF's Vice Chairman for Political Affairs, when he said, "JI is very much a concern of the MILF now because it is hurting the interests of the Bangsamoro people." Author's discussion with Ghazali Jaafar, Deputy Chairman of the MILF, Camp Darapanan, Sultan Kuradat, Mindanao, January 2008.

[41] "MILF Infighting Weakens Its Position, Says Govt Negotiator," IntellAsia/GMA News, August 24, 2011.

these base wars, pointing out that they are serving to raise doubts on the ability of the MILF to discipline its troops and control all those who claim to be members.[42]

MILF unity has important implications both for counterterrorism policy and domestic stability in the Philippines. To the extent that the group exists as a cohesive entity, Manila will have a viable partner with which to negotiate, confident in the knowledge that the activities of rogue elements will be reined in. If MILF command and control should weaken, however, or if the Moro population perceives that the strategy of peace is not producing results, the southern Philippines could revert to the type of decentralized and uncontrolled violence that currently characterizes the southern Thai insurgency.[43]

MILF cohesion could also affect security in the TBA. A weakening of the organization through factionalism and splintering has the potential to spark the same type of wholesale criminal degeneration witnessed in the ASG. Given the general lack of maritime governance throughout the Sulu archipelago, there is a realistic prospect that opportunist elements will seek to exploit trafficking routes or stage kidnappings and robberies across the region.

Splinter MNLF Groups

Although MNLF splinter factions are sometimes neglected in studies of Filipino insurgent and terrorist groups, they also play an important role in the security environment of the southern Philippines. The 1996 peace agreement concluded between then-President Ramos and the MNLF did not require any permanent demobilization of the latter's armed wing, the Bangsa Moro Army. Only around 7,500 of an estimated 45,000 fighters were successfully integrated into the Philippine military and security forces. While most of the remainder returned to their homes or joined the MILF, several hundred retained their separate identity as an armed force. According to authorities in Manila, around 600 ex-MNLF fighters remain active in the southern Philippines. Many are organized in clusters around individual leaders, and there are strong indications that they have periodically joined with the ASG to help repel security sweeps and offensives in Sulu and Jolo. These links reflect common Tausug ties, as well as recognition of the *pintakasi* (literally, "a fight that everyone joins") principles that dictate reciprocal obligations of communal assistance whenever a group is engaged by the military.[44]

Piracy and Sea Robbery

Predatory sea raiding, today referred to as piracy, was a common (and deeply rooted) feature of pre-European Malay societies. Although colonization led to the criminalization of the practice, it was never entirely eradicated and continues to exist as a persistent phenomenon in contemporary Southeast Asia. Within the specific sphere of the TBA, piracy has evolved and adapted to modern conditions and technologies. Weak state control of littoral and maritime spaces, the

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[42] Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), "GPH to MILF: Enforce Discipline Among Forces, Stop the 'Rido' Among Leaders of Your Base Commands," July 18, 2011.

[43] For more on this conflict see Peter Chalk, *The Malay-Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Understanding the Conflict's Evolving Dynamic,* RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Paper 5, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-198-OSD, 2008.

[44] See Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, pp. 47–49; ICG, "The Philippines," Asia Report No. 152, pp. 6–7.

availability of safe havens, the activities of insurgent and terrorist groups, and the growth of criminal networks have all worked to foster an environment favorable to piracy and associated sea-based threats. Modern-day gangs have access to fast boats, automatic weapons (although many in the Sulu and Celebes Seas are armed only with long knives), and information and communications equipment. They also have intimate local knowledge.[45]

Piracy in Southeast Asia takes many forms. It can range from opportunistic robberies of boats at anchor, to more-sophisticated ransacking of ships on the high seas or in territorial waters, to well-organized hijackings of entire vessels for the purposes of fraudulent trade.[46] Attacks have been directed at the entire spectrum of maritime traffic in the region, including fishing trawlers, freighters, tankers, and bulk carriers. The most common modus operandi is to flag down a target, board it, and then order to the crew to jump into the sea (*ambak pare*, "jump, buddy"). The pirates then steal boat parts (such as the engine), cargoes, and other valuables before fleeing, leaving their victims to fend for themselves in the water.[47] Perpetrators have similarly spanned the spectrum of threat actors—from criminalized elements within the ASG to opportunist gangs and more-sophisticated, self-supporting syndicates.

As a result of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, there was a major surge of piracy in Southeast Asia. Indonesia emerged as the most severely affected state in the region, reflecting internal instability following the fall of the Suharto regime and the cataclysmic decline in the value of the rupiah (which provided both opportunity and incentive to engage in maritime crime).[48] Since 1997, the archipelago has typically accounted for around a third of all attacks recorded in Southeast Asia, with incidents peaking in 2003, when 121 cases were reported.[49] Although piracy remains a problem for both Indonesia and the region as a whole, overall rates have begun to decline in recent years. There are several reasons for this, including improved governance, better coastal surveillance, and the initiation of effective bilateral and multilateral measures in the Malacca Strait, the area where attacks have traditionally been most concentrated.[50]

Between 2006 and 2010, most incidents of piracy reported in the TBA occurred in the Celebes Sea, along the east coast of Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). According to the ReCAAP Information Sharing Center (ReCAAP/ISC) in Singapore, there were 19 attacks in this region during 2010, all of which took place between Balikpapan and Tanjung Bara.[51] Although this is a relatively high number, it is still lower than the rates recorded off the north-

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[45] For a historical overview of piracy in Southeast Asia, see Adam J. Young, "Roots of Contemporary Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia," in Derek Johnson and Mark Valencia, eds., *Piracy in Southeast Asia: Status, Issues, and Responses*, IIAS/ISEAS Series on Maritime Issues and Piracy in Asia, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005.

[46] Stephen Riggs, "Piracy in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Study with Southeast Asia," Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, December 2009. See also Peter Chalk, "Grey Area Phenomena in Southeast Asia: Piracy, Drug Trafficking and Political Terrorism," Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Paper 123, 1997, pp. 24–25.

[47] Edwin Espejo, "Piracy Keeping Fishermen at Bay," *Asian Correspondent*, September 14, 2010.

[48] Chalk, *The Maritime Dimension of International Security*, pp. 11–12.

[49] See annual reports published by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

[50] Riggs, "Piracy in the Horn of Africa." These measures have included bilateral and trilateral patrols between the navies of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore; the institution of limited rights of "hot pursuit" into the territorial waters of each of the littoral states; and the commencement of a semi-regular regime of airborne surveillance over the Malacca Strait (in the guise of the Eye in the Sky Initiative/EIS).

[51] ReCAAP is an abbreviation for Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia.

eastern coast of Sumatra (23) or the Sunda Strait and its approaches (38), which continue to be the main epicenters of piracy in Southeast Asia[52] (see Figure 2.2).

Current Security Situation and Prospects

Maritime borders are notoriously difficult to control. This is particularly evident along the Celebes and Sulu Seas, where the littoral countries for the most part lack the means of patrolling their territorial waters. On the other hand, militants traveling through these routes have also incurred substantial vulnerabilities, as is reflected by the number of JI operatives who have been captured while in transit to or from Mindanao. In addition, the archipelagic nature of the region has made it harder for insurgents and terrorists to establish secure sanctuaries or supply bases outside their area of operation.

On balance and from a maritime perspective, it would appear that the security situation in the TBA has vastly improved. JI has suffered significant fragmentation and attrition of its leadership; the ASG has been reduced to small bands under individual commanders. These setbacks have resulted in an attenuated militant presence in the southern Philippines and, hence, a lower overall terrorist threat in the TBA.

That said, maritime awareness in and around the Sulu archipelago remains low and could still facilitate the designs of criminals and resurgent insurgent groups. To offset this possibility, as well as to capitalize on the present improved situation in the region, the Philippines is spearheading moves to promote and enhance coastal surveillance in and around the TBA. The long-term aim of this effort, which is being supported by both the United States and Australia, is to provide the basis for an integrated system of maritime surveillance that effectively ties the Philippines with the two other prominent littoral states in Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia. Examining the current manner by which the CWS is being developed thus provides an interesting assessment of what a future regime of MDA in the TBA might look like.

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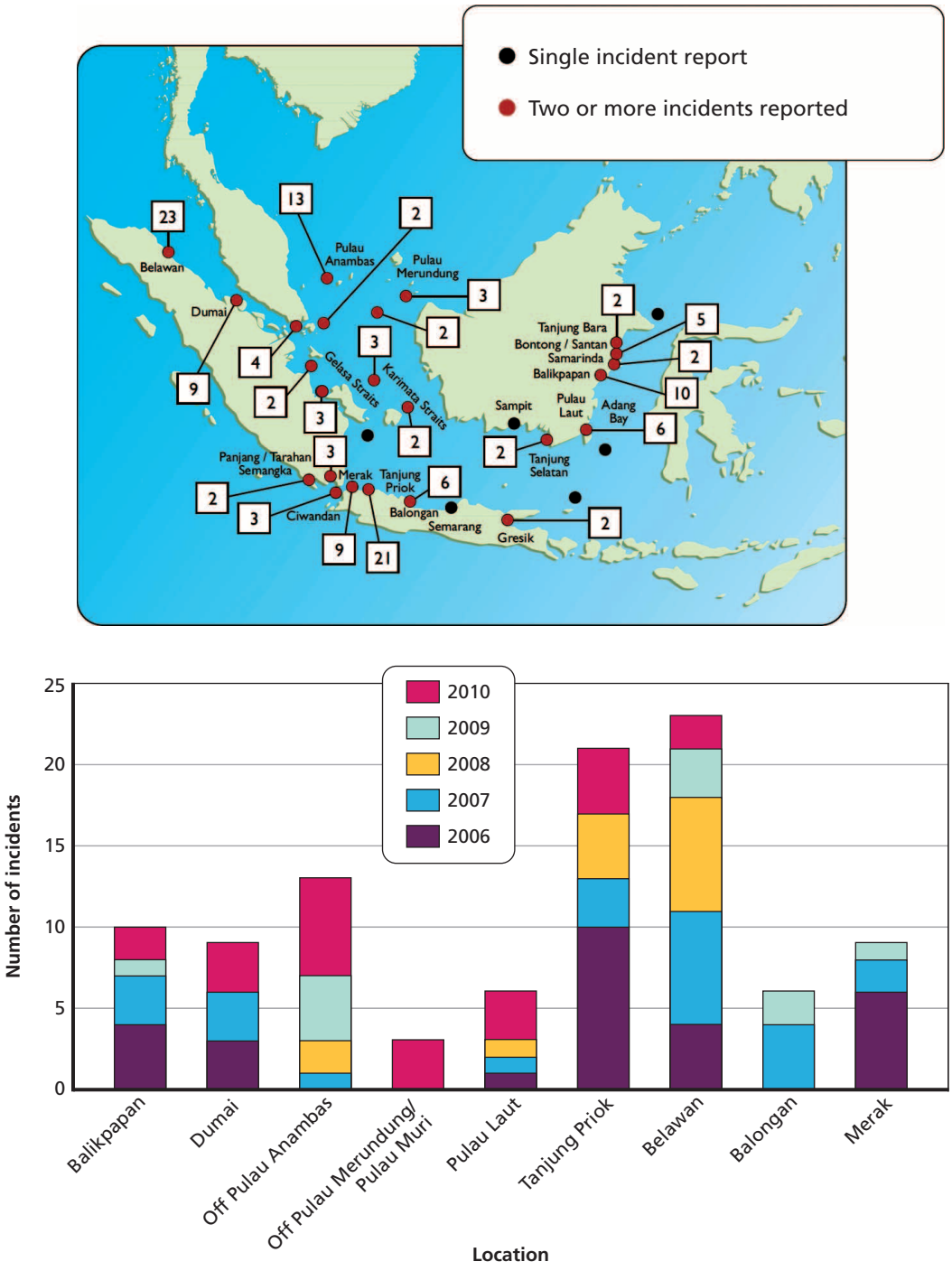
[52] ReCAAP/ISC, Annual Report, 2010.

Figure 2.2
Incidents of Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea, Indonesia, 2006–2010



SOURCE: ReCAAP/ISC, Annual Report, 2010. Used with permission.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Philippines' Coast Watch System

In an attempt to boost maritime surveillance both in the TBA and more generally across the country, Manila has embarked on an ambitious project to develop a string of radar platforms that are intended to provide a comprehensive means for responding to the range of potential maritime threats currently confronting the Philippines. Known as the Coast Watch System (CWS)[1] and supported with assistance from both Australia and the United States, the initiative is nearing completion and should come on line by the end of 2011.[2]

The CWS Concept

The CWS was first conceptualized in 2006 and came into being on November 28, 2008. It is intended to be an interagency effort involving the Philippine Navy (PN), Philippine National Police (PNP), Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), the National Anti-Terrorism Task Force, the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, the Bureau of Customs, the Bureau of Immigration and Deportation, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, the Bureau of Quarantine and Health Services, the Philippine Ports Authority, and the Maritime Industry Authority. The core goal is to establish a system of maritime domain awareness (MDA) that contributes to the attainment of peace and development objectives in the Philippines. The long-term aim is to link the CWS with similar initiatives in Malaysia and Indonesia to create a subregional regime of MDA (*Bakorkamla*) that can then be tied into broader Asia-Pacific multilateral arrangements, such as the Information Fusion Center in Singapore.[3]

The key functions of the initiative are (1) to develop a common operating picture of the maritime domain in the Philippines; (2) to collect, consolidate, and integrate all data relevant to maritime security; and (3) to provide real-time information for the purposes of cueing, locating, interdicting, apprehending, and prosecuting those who engage in illegal maritime activities.[4]

In line with these core functions, the CWS is assigned the operational tasks of countering threat groups—notably the New People's Army (NPA), the ASG, renegade elements from the

[1] The initiative was originally known as Coast Watch South and focused on the southern and western Philippines. It has since been renamed the Coast Watch System to reflect its intended use as a means for enhancing maritime domain awareness across the whole of the country.

[2] Author interviews, Australian official, Manila, August 2011.

[3] Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

[4] Author interviews, MRIC Manila, August 2011.

MILF, pirates, and criminal trafficking organizations—enforcing maritime law, and providing disaster relief. The area of responsibility (AOR) is divided between four main monitoring stations: CWS West (based in West Palawan), CWS North (based in Luzon), CWS South (based in western Mindanao), and CWS East (based in Davao City). These facilities act as local fusion hubs for offshore radar platforms that fall within their jurisdiction. The sites are equipped with radars, an Automated Information System (AIS),[5] UHF-band radios, high-powered binoculars, and infrared and color cameras.[6]

The whole system is coordinated by the Maritime Research Information Center in Manila, which is operational 24/7 and has a staff of 18 (four naval officers, eight enlisted personnel and six civilian employees). The MRIC is primarily responsible for compiling strategic threat assessments (which are posted on a dedicated website that has been operational since December 2010) and providing an informed, unified picture of the maritime environment in the Philippines. Actual executive authority for initiating action against a suspected threat lies with the senior naval officer in each of the four CWS stations.[7]

The CWS will eventually consist of 20 offshore platforms that will have both surveillance and interdiction capabilities (see Figure 3.1). At the time of this writing, 12 were fully operational: Samales, Cabra, Manla, Tinaca, Tongkil, Zamboanga, Pilsasters, Pandami, Bongoa, Pangutaran, Melville, and Ayungini. Another two were in the final stages of development—Mangsee and Mapun—and three other remained works in progress—Balut, Maasin, and Kalamansig. The current CWS plan calls for all 20 platforms to be running by the time the project is completed.[8]

The United States paid for four of these platforms (Pangutaran, Pilas, Pandami, and Tongkil), using monies allocated through Department of Defense 1207 funding. This is a program that uses defense dollars to perform a State Department function. It is analogous to the Foreign Military Financing program, in which money is deposited into a trust fund set up in the recipient country and used to procure defense articles and services as provided through the U.S. foreign military sales system.[9] In Southeast Asia, virtually all of the U.S. 1207 funds go to the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.[10]

Manila has assumed responsibility for underwriting the costs of the remaining platforms.[11] The bulk of the funding will come from the P50 billion that President Aquino has allocated to the Philippine Air Force (PAF) Capability Upgrade Program. This is an 18-year effort aimed at securing a strategic victory against the NPA and ASG in order to facilitate the transition from internal security operations to the consolidation of external defense. A central

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5 The AISs are capable of picking up signals from vessel transponders up to 40 nautical miles away.

6 Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

7 Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

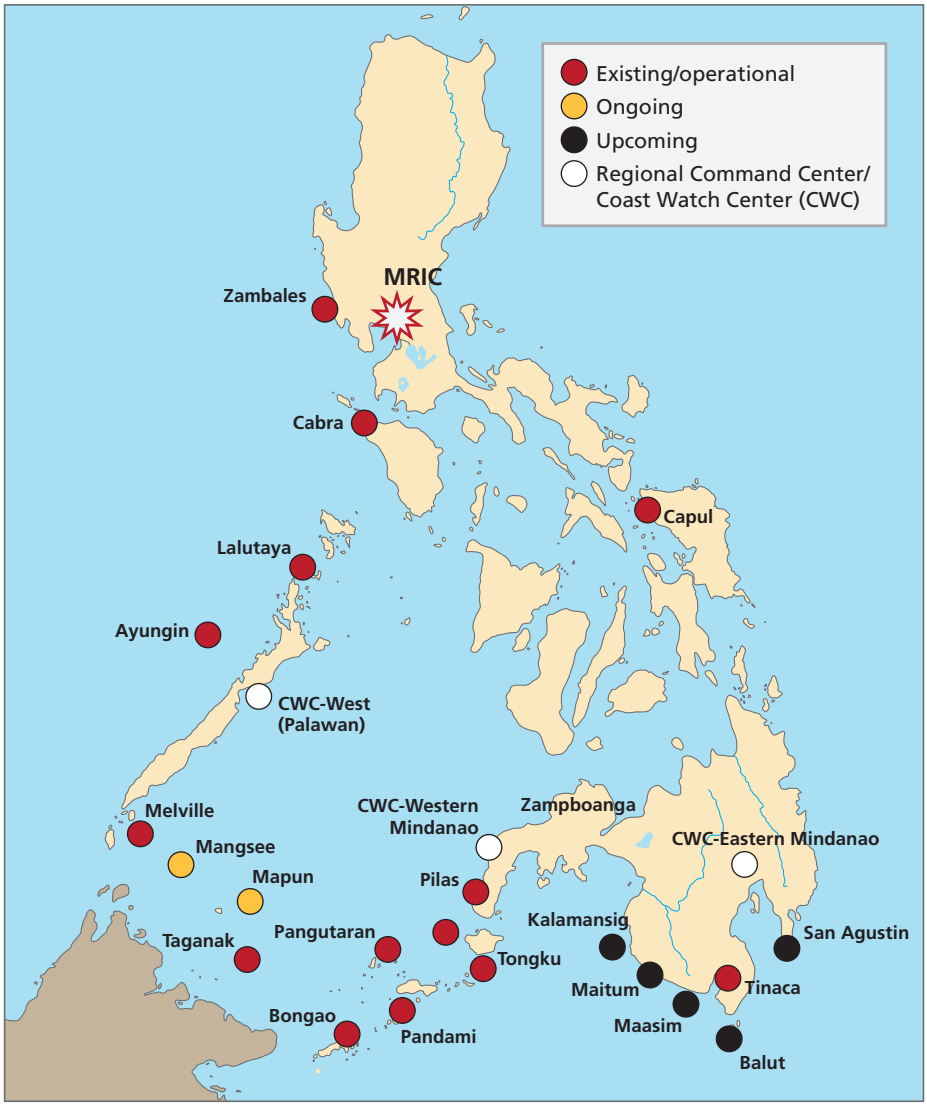
8 Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

9 For more on 1207 funding, see Nina Serafino, *Department of Defense "Section 1207" Security and Stabilization Assistance: Background and Congressional Concerns, FY2006–FY2010,* CRS Report for Congress Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RS22871, February 4, 2010.

10 Chalk et al., *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia*, pp. 172, 175–176.

11 The bill for building a radar station runs to approximately Ps60 million, with operating expenses amounting to an additional Ps400,000 per month (excluding personnel costs).

Figure 3.1
Map of the Coast Watch System



SOURCE: Maritime Research Information Center website, January 17, 2012.
RAND *OP372-3.1*

feature of the program is to consolidate developments occurring within the CWS to help augment collaboration among the PAF, PN, and PCG.[12]

According to naval sources in the Philippines, the CWS is presently receiving a significant proportion of this money because the president of the Philippines is personally committed to the initiative. A limited amount of support also flows from the U.S. Department of Energy, which is helping to underwrite the costs of the radar sites in CWS East (which plays an important role in monitoring offshore oil and gas deposits).[13]

[12] Author interviews, Philippine Coast Guard officials, Manila, September 2009.

[13] Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

Assets

Presently, CWS-owned assets consist mostly of light patrol gunboats and fixed-wing Islander aircraft. The former are retrofitted Boston Whalers that have been deployed to Zamboanga, Davao, and Tawi-Tawi. The latter can transport up to ten people and have an endurance of 5.5 hours flying time at a speed of 120 knots. There are plans to equip the planes with flares to enhance their ability to operate at night; U.S. 1207 funds will be used to pay for these modifications.[14]

Apart from these vessels, the CWS can draw on assets from the PN on an as-needed basis. Currently available equipment includes the following:

- four 7-meter rigid-hull inflatable boats that have a top speed of 30 knots and are capable of transporting a crew of four plus a four-man Sea Air and Land special operations team
- logistics support vessels (LSVs), which are deployed in Cavite and Zamboanga
- multipurpose attack craft, which can run up to speeds of 40 knots, accommodate a platoon-sized unit, and beach on any type of shore. The PN currently has three of these platforms—two in Zamboanga and one in Palawan—and is planning on acquiring an additional two craft from France at a unit cost of Ps70 million (roughly $1.5 million)
- frigates and Corvettes, three of which were acquired from the UK following the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese rule
- close-attack craft
- several old vessels given to the PN by the United States after the Vietnam War.[15]

Benefits of the CWS

The main benefit of the CWS is that it provides a relatively cheap system of surveillance for a large expanse of maritime territory around the Philippines. Between December 2010 and July 2011, over 55,368 vessels were monitored, including more than 34,000 foreign craft.[16] It would be impossible for the PN, much less the PCG, which is almost totally bereft of assets (having only a few corvettes and cutters of its own), to achieve coverage of this magnitude on its own.

In addition, the CWS has helped spur other initiatives designed to promote MDA in the Philippines. The PN is currently in the process of developing a Maritime Group that will have responsibility for enforcing maritime law, and a Sea Marshall Program is already in place to provide security to commercial vessels transiting the six major sea lanes that pass through the

[14] Author interviews, MRIC Manila, August 2011, and CWS South, Zamboanga, January 2010.

[15] Author interview, PN Headquarters, Manila, January 2010, and MRIC, Manila, August 2011. In addition to these assets, the PN is looking into the feasibility of modifying old container ships and vehicular "roll-on, roll-off" ferries into LSVs. The idea is to identify appropriate vessels that will be able to accommodate at least one helicopter hanger, four maritime patrol aircraft, billeting space for sailors and special force operatives, trauma and emergency medical facilities, and a brig for holding detained insurgents and criminals. In the interim, the Navy has entered into an agreement with South Korea to build a new-generation LSV that can be used to transport up to a battalion, as well as assist in noncombatant evacuation operations and disaster relief efforts. The purchasing contract for the LSV has been completed, and it is hoped that the vessel will be ready for delivery by the end of 2011.

[16] Author interviews, MRIC, August 2011. Two hundred lives have also been saved as a result of CWS monitoring.

region. In addition, a number of interagency security workshops and tabletop exercises have been held (both in the Philippines and Australia) to help spur a common operating picture of the best ways, means, and ends for dealing with a given contingency when it arises.[17]

[17] Author interview, PN Headquarters, Manila, January 2010.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

The tri-border area of Southeast Asia constitutes a single geopolitical entity that affects the stability of the larger Southeast Asia maritime region. The area is home to a multitude of social and ethnic groups, many of which have been vulnerable to infiltration by terrorists. With porous borders and vast tracts of inhospitable terrain that are effectively outside the control of the national authorities, the area offers conditions that allow armed militant groups, pirates, and transnational criminal networks to stay hidden from national law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies.

Since the borders of this region are maritime in nature, solutions that address the security challenges of the TBA require a maritime component. The CWS seeks to address one of the key deficiencies of the regional states: the lack of maritime domain awareness. The concept of the CWS is in line with the general notion of "multipurpose applicability," in that it is designed to deal with the whole ambit of threats and challenges emanating from the maritime domain. Not only does this allow for a more cost-effective allocation of scarce resources, but it also accurately reflects the interrelated and complex nature of contemporary maritime transnational threats in this part of the world.[1]

If it evolves as intended, the CWS will form the basis of an integrated system of maritime security that ties together the three prominent littoral states in Southeast Asia: Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.[2] Partnerships of this kind have demonstrated a proven ability to promote confidence-building and, just as importantly, to positively alter the weight that governments attach to perceptions of their own national interests. In a region where concerns for sovereignty and lingering disputes over maritime boundaries have significantly hindered the prospects for comprehensive MDA, the value of such an outcome should not be underestimated.

Despite these benefits—actual and potential—the CWS confronts an array of challenges. The first is a dearth of human and physical assets. As noted, virtually all the modern vessels available for interdiction are in fact owned by the PN, not the CWS. This creates a dependency that could easily limit overall autonomy and blunt the latitude for rapid response—although, in the long term, this might be alleviated through the pooling of assets from Malaysia and Indonesia. Given the size of its AOR, the CWS is also devoid of sufficient aviation and surveillance equipment. Critical needs that have been identified include long-range patrol maritime aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, all-weather helicopters, and radar systems that possess both long and wide capabilities. In terms of personnel, most of the monitoring sites have a staff of

[1] Jaime Laude, "RP's First Line of Defense vs External Security Threat Almost Done," *The Philippine Star*, May 16, 2010.

[2] Author interview, Philippine Army Civil-Military Operations Group, Fort Bonifacio, Manila, January 12, 2010.

only two to three people. According to officials with the MRIC, at least eight are needed to allow each of these platforms to operate on a 24/7 basis.[3]

Second, before a true regime of integrated regional maritime security can be implemented, necessary protocols for trilateral agreements will have to be worked out between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.[4] While Manila has entered into a number of standing cooperative maritime arrangements with Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, including a Joint Maritime Patrol Agreement with the former and a Memorandum of Understanding for the mutual forward deployment of customs and immigration officials at designated border crossings with the latter, there has as yet been no decisive move to formalize this collaboration beyond a narrow, bilateral, government-to-government context.[5] In many respects, this reflects the age-old problem in Southeast Asia of sovereignty concerns and difficulties arising out of overlapping claims of maritime jurisdiction. This is particularly true in the case of the Philippines and Malaysia, whose relations in the maritime realm continue to suffer from competing territorial claims.[6] In addition, both Manila and Jakarta have aired a degree of resentment over Kuala Lumpur's reticence to establish truly effective information flows.

Third, although the CWS is meant to be an interagency effort, it is still largely a naval affair.[7] This is problematic, not only in terms of diluting the supposed "multistakeholder" character of the system but also because it further stretches already thin PN resources. Indeed, according to informed sources in Manila, the PN is already looking to extricate itself from the Sea Marshall Program so it can more adroitly focus its energies on the CWS.[8]

Fourth, the CWS still has to confront an array of interagency issues. Although there is a plan to eventually have a National Coast Watch Council to help coordinate and streamline the key players in the system, the three main entities assigned with constabulary functions—the PN, PCG, and Maritime Police (which is part of the PNP)—have yet to develop common standard operating procedures; continue to engage in turf wars; and actively compete with one another for scarce resources.[9] Problems have been especially manifest with the PCG and PN. The former is still sensitive about its status as the Philippines' "poor man's navy"; the latter has not forgotten that the PCG moved to establish itself as an independent entity in 1998.[10]

Fifth, the PN faces considerable constraints in terms of maintaining its vessels (much of which is presently outsourced to the private sector) and obtaining spare parts for older-generation craft, such as the Vietnam War–era boats donated by the United States. These challenges are mirrored in other areas of the Filipino defense and security community—notably the Philippine Air Force, posing significant problems for sustaining operational

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3 Author interview, MRIC Manila, August 2011.

4 Author interview, CWS South, Zamboanga, January 2010.

5 Author interview, PCG, Manila, September 2009.

6 Author interview, PN Headquarters, January 2010.

7 Author interviews, MRIC, Manila, August 2011.

8 Author interviews, PN Headquarters, January 13, 2010.

9 Author interviews, MRIC, August 2011.

10 Author interview, PN Headquarters, Manila, January 2010. The PCG decision to split from the PN was largely prompted by the need to access international civilian security assistance from countries that are precluded from granting loans to uniformed branches (such as Japan).

tempo and ensuring that deployable assets are not continually stressed at levels above optimal capacity.[11]

Finally, while CWS will have the benefit of various forms of signals and electronic information, the input of human-sourced intelligence is far more questionable. This is especially true in the southern Philippines, where the security forces still suffer from a major deficit in trust. It is certainly not apparent that local communities will be willing to work in collaboration with members of the CWS to provide real-time information on criminal or insurgent movements in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. In a region where "blood is often thicker than water" and where loyalties are often determined by clan and or tribal allegiances, this could prove to be one of the initiative's key weaknesses.[12]

Future Outlook for the CWS

The CWS has the potential to play a significant role in helping to augment MDA and border security in the Philippines and in the larger TBA. The initiative has been universally endorsed in the United States and Australia, is generally welcomed by the Philippine armed forces (over and above the PN), and represents a cost-effective means for countering maritime transnational threats. The system's future will depend on the ability and willingness of Manila to sustain stations that are up and running, ensure proper integration and connectivity for those that are nearing completion, and acquire such necessary equipment as long-range surveillance platforms and sensors.

Just as important, the CWS must necessarily evolve beyond the PN-centric character that it currently exhibits if the system is to fulfill the type of comprehensive MDA that it is supposed to engender. Finally, more needs to be done to link the CWS with wider hearts-and-minds initiatives that are designed to win over the trust and support of the local population. This will be crucial in persuading island communities located across the southern Philippines, particularly in the highly unstable Tawi-Tawi chain, that they have a direct stake in countering the activities of criminals and insurgents. Properly fostered, local buy-in of this sort will furnish the CWS with a highly useful force multiplier effect that will, in turn, greatly enhance the potential scope of its national maritime surveillance efforts.

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[11] Author interview, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group, Camp Aguinaldo, January 11, 2010, and Philippine Air Force, Manila, September 15, 2010.

[12] Author interviews, Western diplomatic officials, Manila, January 13, 2010.

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