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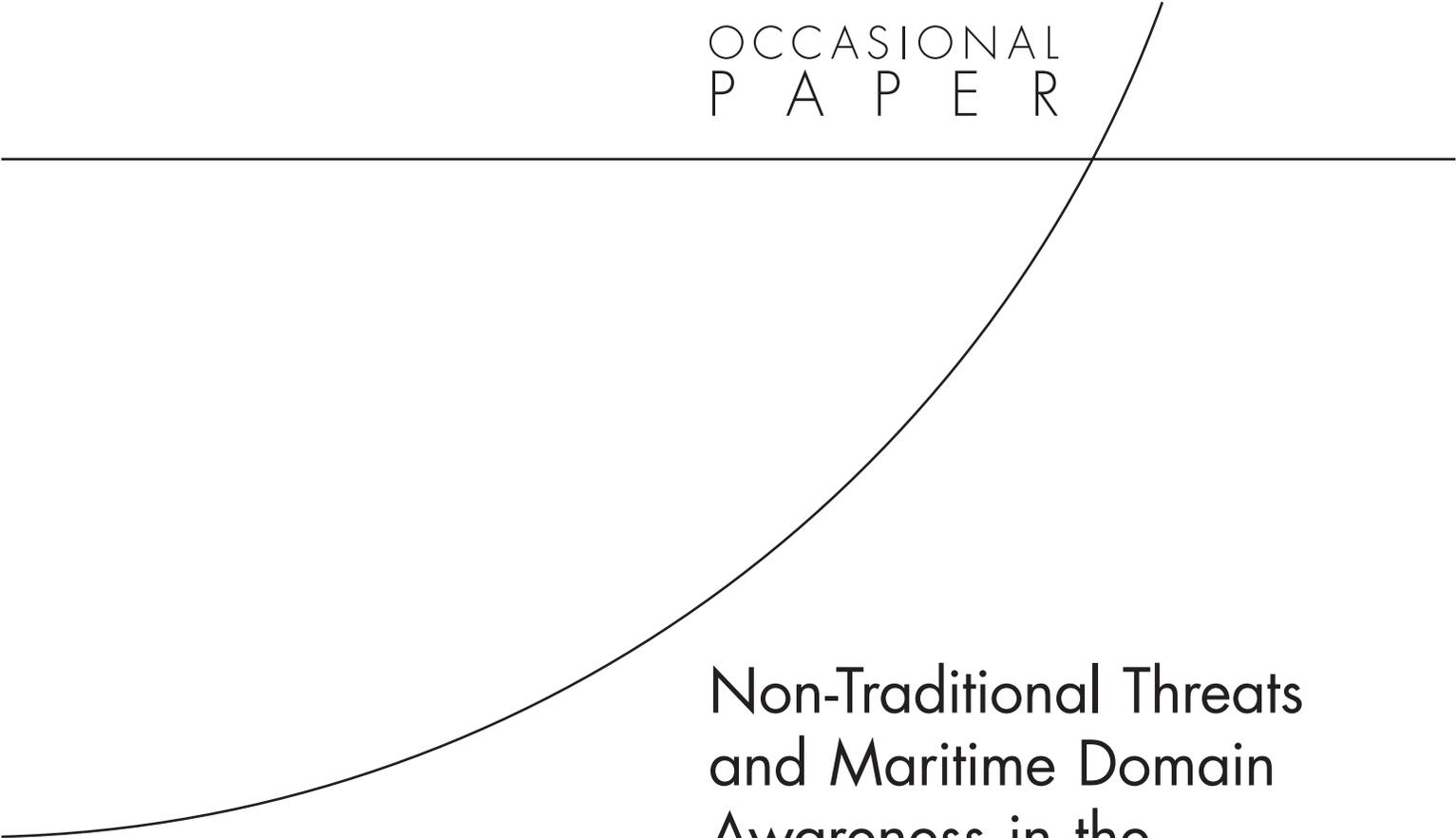
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P A P E R



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

The Coast Watch System of the Philippines

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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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.