



The Parting of the Sulawesi Sea

U.S. Strategy and Transforming the Terrorist Transit Triangle

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PHOTO: Two rigid-hull inflatable boats operated by members of U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) approach a Philippine Navy patrol boat carrying survivors from a ferry that sank in the waters off Zamboanga del Norte 6 September 2009. (U.S. Navy, Petty Officer 1st Class Robin Ressler)

WHILE MOST U.S. efforts in overseas contingency operations focus on the Middle East, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa, other efforts center in Southeast Asia on the tri-border region of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia around the Sulawesi Sea. This area, more commonly known as the “T3”—the Terrorist Transit Triangle—remains the U.S. Pacific Command’s primary area of interest for counterterrorism in the Pacific and its primary focus of bilateral military engagement within Southeast Asia. This article discusses the various threats in the T3 region and the reactions of the three nations that surround it.

Looking for a Needle in a Stack of Needles

The expanse known as T3 centers on the Sulawesi Sea, which separates the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The area is much larger and more remote than most Americans appreciate. Just the water area of the Sulawesi Sea is larger than the combined areas of the states of Texas and Louisiana. Even defining the water area is complicated because the Sulawesi Sea separates two archipelagic nations—Indonesia and the Philippines—and adjoins eastern Malaysia. To the southwest, the Sulawesi intersects one of the most important waterways for energy security in the Pacific, the Makassar Straights, which contain the world’s second largest operational liquid natural gas field.¹

Several island chains bisect the T3, providing natural corridors for transit. They provided trading routes during the precolonial era in Southeast Asia. Today, along with legitimate trade, they provide relatively safe transit routes for criminal and terrorist elements and for the movement of weapons and personnel to the region’s two infamous terrorist groups, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Southeast Asia, and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the southern Philippines.

Four main island chains transit the T3 area. These chains have many unofficial names—“rat lines,” “infiltration routes,” “terrorist corridors”—and are referred to differently by Department of Defense, Department of State, various intelligence agencies, and Department of Justice officials. From west to east, the first route (Route 1) originates and terminates in northern Mindanao or the central Philippines, and it extends west to the Philippine



Southeast Asia map showing the terrorist transit triangle.

island of Palawan. Palawan is, in turn, a waypoint for transit into the eastern Malaysian city of Sandakan, another port in the state of Sabah.

The second route (Route 2), a direct line along the Sulu archipelago island chain, is the most obvious and the most infamous of these routes. This line originates and terminates in the southwestern Mindanao city of Zamboanga, and it extends southwest down a chain of islands from Basilan to Jolo, the tiny island of Tapul, Tawi-Tawi, and Sibutu. The route then splits toward either the island of Timbunmata and the Malaysian port town of Tawao or toward the island of Ligitan and the Malaysian port of Lahaddatu. Alternatively, it splits toward the Indonesian port of Nunukan or turns back northwesterly towards Sandakan at the terminus of Route 1.

The third route (Route 3) originates and terminates in southern Mindanao near General Santos City, and it crosses the T3 via a group of small islands that lead to Tahuna Island, which is off the extreme northeast tip of the island of Sulawesi. From Tahuna, the route follows a southerly path directly to the Indonesian port cities of Manado and Bitung.

The fourth and final route (Route 3A) is a branch of the General Santos City-Manado route. It only recently came to light in the wake of sectarian violence in Poso on central Sulawesi in February and March 2007. Weapons and trained cadre intended for Indonesian fundamentalist organizations moved out of the Philippines via this route to support the violence in Poso.² The route originates and terminates near General Santos City, and it veers southeast to Karkarekelong Island just inside Indonesian territory, then proceeds on a southerly course to the Indonesian port city of Ternate, on the island of Halmahera. From Ternate, the route moves in a southwesterly direction to central Sulawesi, avoiding the more guarded ports of Manado and Bitung.

The “Realpolitik” of the Sulawesi Sea

Compounding the geospatial challenges of the T3 region, all three countries in the region are (to put it politely) undergoverned. The region lacks the necessary resources to make it governable. The most tangible evidence of this state of affairs is the paucity of border controls exercised by the three nations in the region. It is not uncommon for a person to travel freely between any of the three nations without ever encountering a border control agent. Consequently, terrorists and their support elements can move between training areas in Mindanao while returning to or transiting from Indonesia and Malaysia en route to other destinations. This freedom of movement enables them to blend with the general population or form networks with other illegal elements to facilitate the flow of persons, weapons, and communication across the T3.

Currently, no formal mechanism facilitates either tri-nation cooperation in the T3 or a U.S.-led multilateral effort—only an unofficial network of individual military and law enforcement officials from each nation exists. The lack of effort to legitimize the borders within the T3 seems to validate the old adage about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: it is primarily an economic grouping that is capable of cooperating, but not coordinating.

There are four main reasons for the lack of cooperation that obstructs effective multilateral coordination across the T3:

- Distrust amongst the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.
- Lack of resources.

- Interservice rivalry and ineffectual coordination among government agencies.
- Corruption.

Distrust. The Philippines has fair relations with Indonesia mainly because of the distance between the two nations. However, this is not the case with Malaysia. The end of the Sulu Archipelago is within eyesight of the Malaysian state of Sabah, and many ethnic Filipinos cross into Malaysia in search of plantation work, creating a tense atmosphere whenever Filipinos and Malaysians meet to discuss bilateral issues.

The Malaysian-Philippines relationship seems congenial compared to Malaysia's relations with Indonesia, except for a territorial dispute over the Ambalat block, an undersea parcel of land with a direct impact on bilateral cooperation in the T3. Contested by Indonesia and Malaysia, the Ambalat block in the Sulawesi is located off the coast of the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan and southeast of the Malaysian state of Sabah. Malaysia refers to part of it as "Block ND 6" while part of the East Ambalat block is "Block ND 7." The sea blocks are rich in crude oil.

The dispute over the Ambalat stretch of the Sulawesi Sea began with the publication of a map by Malaysia in 1979 depicting its territorial waters and continental shelf. The map drew Malaysia's maritime boundary in a southeast direction in the Sulawesi Sea from the eastern-most point of the Indonesia-Malaysia land border on the eastern shore of Sebatik Island, including the Ambalat block, or at least a large portion of it, within Malaysian territorial waters. Indonesia and other neighbors of Malaysia objected to the map. Indonesia has never officially announced its maritime territorial limits, but in June 2002 it declared the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan for its own. Both Indonesia and Malaysia once claimed these islands— which Malaysia included as part of its territory in its 1979 map—to be its archipelagic base points. This effectively put

Indonesia has never officially announced its maritime territorial limits . . .

the entire Ambalat area within its internal waters.

Lack of resources. The government of the Philippines has long neglected Mindanao and particularly the portions that fall into the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. This neglect extends across the full spectrum of governance—political, social, economic, and military. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have traditionally been underfunded, but became even more so after 1992, when the United States removed its bases in the Philippines and ended United States grant aid, leading to underfunding of units and bases in Mindanao throughout the 1990s. The U.S. discovered the extent of the underfunding after the deployment of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines to Zamboanga in February 2002. The task force was shocked and dismayed to discover how little its assigned AFP partner actually controlled the units assigned to it.³

Indonesian security forces are as short of funds as those of the Philippines. Another common trait with the Philippines is the economic activities that the Indonesian Armed Forces and National Police employ to make ends meet or to produce profit for their commanders. There is a direct correlation between the distance from Jakarta and the autonomy of security forces.

Malaysia is the exception to the rule in terms of resources available to support counterterrorism efforts. The Malaysian Armed Forces and Coast Guard are better equipped and trained than those of Indonesia and the Philippines. For Malaysia, the problem seems to be more a question of will and a reluctance to cooperate too closely with its neighbors or the United States. The Malaysian security forces are Malaccan Straits-centric with only a grudging interest in T3 problems beyond defending Ambalat from Indonesian incursions.

Rivalry and ineffectual coordination among government agencies. In the wake of Ferdinand Marcos' 1986 expulsion from the Philippines, the AFP underwent a massive restructuring. As part of this restructuring, a small coastal protection force, the Philippine Coast Guard, divorced itself from the Philippine Navy. Unfortunately, the divorce was not amicable, and both the Navy and the newly formed Coast Guard were unhappy with the division of bases, vessels, and personnel. The ensuing 22 years have done little to heal this rift.

Conflicting missions and muddled lines of responsibility have only made matters worse. To the horror of the Philippine Navy, the Philippine Coast Guard is a better funded, albeit a smaller organization. Its presence in the T3 is small, and its communications and coordination with the Navy and the AFP nonexistent. Professional jealousy exists between the Navy and Coast Guard in Malaysia, too, although the Malaysian rivalry is less than three years old.

The Royal Malaysian Police have the lead in counterterrorism, while the Malaysian Armed Forces play only a supporting role. The Royal Malaysian Police view the problems in the T3 as transnational crime issues, while the Malaysian Armed Forces view them as national sovereignty issues, leaving little room for multilateral cooperation.

Interagency cooperation in Indonesia is practically unknown. In an attempt to remedy the situation, the government of the Indonesia placed one of its planning agencies, Indonesian Maritime Security Coordinating Board, in control of maritime security

and made it the lead agency in the creation of an Indonesian Coast Guard. The Indonesian aversion to sharing information is an important factor as well.⁴

Corruption. Corruption in the AFP reflects corruption in the government and society in the Philippines. In Mindanao, corruption is present in almost all aspects of the AFP's daily existence. The AFP's policy of recruiting locally for enlisted personnel and noncommissioned officers compounds already endemic problems, entrenching AFP units geographically and hindering their mobility. To the dismay of the U.S. forces, operational security is next to impossible when planning AFP operations.

Corruption is still an unpleasant fact of life in Malaysia, too, but less prevalent than in Indonesia or the Philippines. Scrutiny from distant Kuala Lumpur is much more lax in far eastern Malaysia. Indonesian fishermen frequently must pay bribes, surrender their catch, or both in order to avoid confinement in a Sabah detention facility. If Indonesian fishermen pay bribes to avoid entanglements with the Malaysian Coast Guard or Police, obviously



U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Troy Latham

Armed Forces of the Philippines soldiers practice urban movement techniques they learned as part of a subject matter expert exchange with the U.S. Marine Corps, 10 May 2007.

other better-financed organizations can as well. Corruption in Indonesia and its security forces is legendary. The reasons are many, but are usually associated with the security forces' lack of resources for operations.

National Outlooks, U.S. Security Assistance, and Multinational Cooperation

The need for multilateral cooperation in counterterrorism in the T3 seems like a “no brainer” to the United States. On the surface, it would seem that multilateral counterterrorist cooperation is in the obvious self-interest of the states involved. In many ways, the Filipino point of view on terrorism and multilateral cooperation is more congruent with that of the United States than with that of the other littorals, as are its motives in cooperation. The threat posed by Mindanao separatists and terrorists trained and supported in Indonesia and Malaysia, and the Philippines' history as a former U.S. colony and current defense treaty partner, foster cooperation with the United States.⁵ On the other hand, cooperation with the United States seems counterintuitive to Malaysia and Indonesia.⁶

Indonesia was slow to awaken to the transnational threat posed by Jemaah Islamiyah. Indonesia considered the JI as an internal and regional threat when its violent activities came to light in Maluku and Poso, far from the capital in Jakarta. Most Indonesians believe that the JI bombing in Bali on 12 October 2002, the bombing of the Marriott in Jakarta in 2003, the bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 2004, and the October 2005 bombing in Bali indicated the JI was focusing on U.S. and Western targets in response to the U.S.-led War on Terrorism.⁷

Most Indonesians worry about foreign-funded extremists infiltrating mainstream Muslim organizations and regard illegal fishing, wildlife smuggling, logging, and trafficking as the only serious threats emanating from the Sulawesi.⁸ The government of Indonesia points out that its economic losses due to these illegal activities total nearly \$8 billion a year.⁹

Like Indonesia, Malaysia views maritime security in the Sulawesi as a law enforcement and sovereignty problem, not a counterterrorism problem. In multilateral maritime security meetings, Malaysian

representatives tend to disengage from counterterrorist discussions by asserting that terrorism in the region is a problem for Indonesia and the Philippines. No active extremist groups operate within Malaysia's borders.

Since 2002, all three nations have upgraded their counterterrorism capabilities. However, progress has been uneven, much of it depending on each nation's relationship with the United States and its eligibility for U.S. foreign assistance, in particular Department of Defense “1206” dollars designed to create counterterrorism capabilities. The progress has been most rapid in the Philippines. On the other hand, Malaysia, which possesses the most capable counterterrorism forces in the region, has shown itself the least likely to cooperate with its neighbors or with the United States. Indonesia, for its part, possesses a counterterrorist capability, but cannot bring itself to do the necessary internal governmental coordination or provide the necessary resources to sustain it.

Connecting the Dots

The U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) has faced a steep learning curve, and its initial efforts to facilitate a spirit of cooperation amongst the littorals were anything but smooth. To their credit, Pacific Command, DOD, and the State Department have learned their lessons about sovereignty concerns in the region. They started low-profile regional capacity-building programs and sponsored multilateral conferences to help build domain awareness, first in the Straits of Malacca and later in the Sulawesi Sea, to help states better enforce their laws. The Joint Interagency Coordinating Group, organized under the PACOM J-5, Plans and Policy, led the way in terms of U.S. efforts to kindle the fires of regional cooperation in maritime security and counterterrorism. With substantial encouragement from diplomats and U.S. military officials assigned to the region, the three nations slowly and deliberately encouraged the littorals' reengagement on cooperation.

The Philippines led the region in building a comprehensive network of interagency cooperation that balanced surveillance, communication, and interdiction across the Philippine portion of the T3. The Philippines inaugurated Coast Watch South, the country's version of the famed Australian Coast

Watchers of World War II. Coast Watch South has Pacific Command's enthusiastic support and receives U.S. military and law enforcement grant assistance.¹⁰ The Joint Interagency Task Force West brought together military and law enforcement capabilities to combat transnational drug-related crime in the region.

The U.S. Department of Justice International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program is spearheading a separate but congruent initiative in Indonesia. Indonesian maritime security stakeholders seem to realize that their bureaucratic infighting has done little to detangle conflicting and overlapping authorities and see the need for a fresh approach. Begun in early 2009 and collectively known as the Tarakan Initiative, these program-developed actions represent a significant cultural shift in sharing basic goals and objectives within the government of Indonesia.

The Tarakan Initiative also brought together the Indonesian National Police, the Department of Sea Transportation (which controls the Ports Authority and an independent search and rescue arm), the Department of Customs, Department of Immigration, the Ministry of Fisheries, prosecutors, quarantine officials, and representatives of the Indonesian Navy to identify—

- Problems within the Sulawesi from their individual perspectives.
- Tasks and roles.
- Solution sets.
- Contributions each agency could make to the solution in terms of experience and assets.

The Tarakan Initiative group validated that illegal fishing, logging, smuggling, and various forms of trafficking are more serious threats to Indonesia's sovereignty than terrorism.

Conclusion

The geospatial and political challenges to effective counterterrorism cooperation in the T3 are daunting, but not insurmountable. Through its grant aid programs, the United States is slowly leading nations in the region toward a more practical and constructive relationship that will lead to effective cooperation. With practically all of the "1206" imagery and communications equipment from a common supplier, the technical cornerstones are in place for a regional common operating picture.

The political will to switch on that capability in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia does not yet exist, but the prospects for future cooperation are much brighter than only a few years ago.

Pacific Command's indirect approach to multi-lateral maritime security cooperation will inevitably lead to counterterrorist cooperation in the Sulawesi, and it is beginning to make a real change in perceptions about the viability and practicality of cooperation in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Ultimately, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines will not come fully on board until they realize it is in their best interest. However, success is achievable if the United States has the political savvy to remain an indirect leader or facilitator in the process and remember the keys to success in the region—presence, persistence, and patience. **MR**

NOTES

1. Indonesia's fields at Balikpapan, on the eastern side of Borneo, supply Japan with almost half its gas consumption. Its shipping lanes must pass through all three littoral nations' territory in the Sulawesi.

2. Most of the weapons from the conflict can be traced to the most notorious arms market in the region, the Sulu Arms market in the southern Philippines. "What makes the Sulu market unique is its longevity which is measured in centuries. In modern times, guns from the area supply conflicts and crime from Japan to Sri Lanka to Papua New Guinea and beyond; and in turn, the world pours guns and ammunition into Mindanao, the Maluku (Moluccas) Islands, and to a lesser extent, Malaysia and the rest of the Philippines. Like most black arms pipelines, the Sulu Arms Market is intertwined with piracy, terrorism, and the traffic of other illicit commodities. Criminal gangs, communists, Moro independence groups, and Islamic militants are all major players in the market, making it a security problem for at least five Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states." From unpublished dissertation paper, "Arms Trafficking in the Sulu Region and National Responses to a Regional Problem," by Major Lino Miani, U.S. Army, Olmsted Scholar, University of Malaya, 2009.

3. On 28 August 2006, GHQ Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) issued a General Order that split the former SOUTHCOM, and established Western Mindanao Command, or WESMINCOM (WMC), and Eastern Mindanao Command or EastMinCom (EMC). With the focus on several insurgent/terrorist threats spread throughout that AOR, to include mainland Mindanao, Basilan, and Sulu archipelago, it was difficult for a single unified command to cover so vast an area. The AFP's intent was to split, giving each command their own AOR on which to focus resources, along with a threat focus. While both new commands retain focus on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, it also split the New People's Army and Abu Sayyaf Group/Jemaah Islamiyah threat to EMC and WMC. Information provided by LTC Rick Riker, JUSMAG-Philippines.

4. There is also an ongoing intense struggle amongst the Indonesian Navy, the Indonesian National Police, Maritime Police, and the Department of Transportation-Sea Transportation over what authority each will have. Senior Indonesian officials have stated that the legal, regulatory, and administrative hurdles will likely not be resolved for the next year.

5. The U.S.-Philippines bilateral relationships are far from smooth, and the U.S.-Philippine Status of Forces Agreement, called the Visiting Forces Agreement, is frequently the subject of a great deal of political theater; however the overall bilateral relationship remains by far the strongest and most transparent amongst the nations of the T3.

6. In Mindanao, recruiting, training, indoctrination financial and operational links between the Jemaah Islamiyah and other militant groups, specifically the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Misuari Renegade/Breakaway Group, and the Philippine Raja Solariman Movement remain active.

7. More alarmingly, in mid-2008, U.S. Embassy Jakarta's internal Indonesian polling data revealed that 60 percent of Indonesians believe the United States was singularly responsible for the Global War on Terrorism.

8. Joe Cochrane, "Extremists Infiltrating Mainstream," *Jakarta Globe* in English, 3 April 2009.

9. Provided by the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program U.S. Embassy, Jakarta.

10. Jamie Laude, "Pentagon confirms support to AFP coast watch in South," *Philippine Star*, 10 July 2009.