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# Policy Forum 08-053: Securing the Sulu Sea



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# Securing the Sulu Sea

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Securing the Sulu Sea

By Mark J. Valencia

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## I. Introduction

Mark J. Valencia, a Maritime Policy Analyst and a Nautilus Institute Senior Associate, writes, "the littoral states of the Sulu Sea need to gain the "confidence" of the United States that they can - with capacity building and the right equipment-handle the problem themselves. The first steps would be to agree to co-ordinated patrols, 'hand-off' hot pursuit, and an 'eye in the sky' arrangement."

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## II. Article by Mark J. Valencia

- "Securing the Sulu Sea"

By Mark J. Valencia

The Sulu archipelago (Basilan, Jolo and Tawi-Tawi) and Mindanao have been neglected by Manila for years. The resulting weak governance, corruption and poverty have led to a 'wild west' atmosphere where piracy and trafficking of narcotics, guns and people is rife. The Philippine Armed Forces are weak and poorly equipped and maritime security co-operation between Malaysia and the Philippines is very limited. Thus 'terrorist' organizations like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and elements of the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) can operate with relative impunity.

This has drawn the attention of the United States which is actively "supporting" Philippine troops in their effort to subdue the ASG and the MILF. But it may have motives extending well beyond the immediate task at hand. Of course the "cover" purpose is to vanquish the ASG and thus deprive it and related groups like Jemaah Islamiyah of safe havens to plan and prepare strikes against national and global targets.

But despite its denials, the United States may eventually want to re-establish major conventional bases in this geographic heart of maritime Southeast Asia. Since 2002, the United States has, through a 'back door' approach, incrementally integrated the Philippines into its forward military posture in Asia. It refers to its bases in Mindanao as "forward operating bases" similar to its special forces presence in the Horn of Africa. The forces are called the Joint Special Operation Task Force Philippines and are an integral part of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Middle East anti-terror operation. They are considered a model for future US military operations. According to then Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld, "in place of traditional overseas bases with extensive infrastructure, we intend to use smaller forward operating bases with pre-positioned equipment and rotational presence of personnel..." "We will maintain a smaller forward - presence force in the Pacific while also stationing agile expeditionary forces capable of rapid responses at our power projection bases".

The 500 - 700 uniformed military presence whose details are classified is now more entrenched in the Philippines than any time since the US military was politically forced out of its Clark and Subic bases in 1991. The current arrangement falls under a 1999 RP - US Visiting Forces Agreement which allows joint training of Filipino and American soldiers, as well as a US-Philippines counter-terrorism agreement. The United States and the Philippines also undertake annual joint exercises such as in June 2007 when three US warships and three Philippine patrol boats maneuvered off Basilan with a focus on maritime interdictions.

The United States has recently focused on border protection in the Sulu Sea. It is supporting the establishment in the Southern Philippines of a massive high tech surveillance system involving effective radar and patrols using advanced sea and air equipment. This includes P-3 Orion surveillance planes, unmanned aerial vehicles, spy satellites, fast patrol boats and helicopters. Under a command arrangement called Coast Watch South, 17 stations will monitor maritime security with a focus on transnational crime and terrorism near borders with Malaysia and Indonesia. The United States has also established the Maritime Interdiction Co-ordination Center in Zamboanga to combat narco-terrorism. This is despite the fact the Lt. Gen. Eugene Cedo, Philippines Armed Forces' Western Mindanao Command said there is no direct evidence that links the ASG to drug smuggling or peddling.

Under their agreements with the Philippines, the United States has been pouring in equipment. It has given over 500 million in military assistance since 2002. Recently it provided 27 million worth of special radar, heat-detecting cameras, computers and night vision goggles to the Philippines,

Malaysia and Indonesia to ferret out 'terrorists' using the Sulu and adjacent Sulawesi Seas.

A rather poorly kept secret is that the U.S. forces do all but capture or kill the targets. Despite not being authorized to engage in combat, U.S. forces pinpoint the villages and even the houses allegedly occupied by armed ASG members. All the Philippine troops have to do is 'execute'. However, this is not always done successfully. In one such raid on 4 February 2008 no insurgents were captured, but seven civilians including four children and two soldiers were killed and five other soldiers were wounded. The Judge Advocate General's Office of the Western Mindanao Command absolved the soldiers. But a Philippines Commission on Human Rights report said that the soldiers may have been killed by "friendly fire" and the Commission filed charges against the survivors for the killing of innocent civilians.

This is all beginning to sound rather familiar. The Philippines - and Malaysia, the alleged geographic source as well as the target of some of the nefarious actors and activities-- need to consider where this is all headed and the probable end result. Will the U.S. forces leave once the 'job' is 'done'? Or will they stay on indefinitely for their own purposes. If so, is this desired by Manila and Kuala Lumpur? These capitals may have some hard-thinking to do.

To avoid this dilemma, the littoral states of the Sulu Sea need to gain the "confidence" of the United States that they can - with capacity building and the right equipment-handle the problem themselves. The first steps would be to agree to co-ordinated patrols, 'hand-off' hot pursuit, and an 'eye in the sky' arrangement. These programs have been implemented in the Malacca and Singapore Straits by the littoral countries there with considerable practical and political success. Piracy incidents there have decreased dramatically, confidence has been built among the littoral states, and most importantly, the maritime powers seem assured- for the time being-- that the littoral states have the matter in hand. At least they are no longer threatening to directly intervene. The same 'confidence building' could be tried in the Sulu Sea.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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