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Report

Crisis in Mindanao:

Duterte and the Islamic State's Pivot to Asia

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Armed members of the New People's Army (NPA) aim their weapons during an event commemorating the 47th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of the Philippines, in Ifugao province, north of Manila in 2015 [Reuters]

Introduction

The paper has three aims. Firstly, it provides an overview of the spectre of Islamic State (IS) in Southeast Asia, particularly in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao,⁽¹⁾ where local extremist groups have unified under the flag of the Middle East-based organisation. Secondly, it seeks to evaluate the Rodrigo Duterte administration's response to this development. President Duterte⁽²⁾ has since 2016 declared Martial Law across the entire island and has solicited defence aid from major powers as well as regional states. Finally, the paper looks at the broader impact on peace process in Mindanao and the Muslim minority in the Philippines. A background on the context of conflict in Mindanao is in order.

Mindanao and conflict: A brief historical context Introduction

Shortly after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte embarked on a high-profile state visit to Russia, a legion of Islamic State-affiliated groups launched a daring siege (May 23, 2017) on Marawi, the Philippines' largest Muslim-majority city. At first, the security forces tried to downplay the situation, claiming that local authorities are still in full control of the besieged city. Within a day, however, the militants, led by the Maute Group, also known as the Islamic State of Lanao (ISL), rampaged across the city, raised the IS' flag in key areas, and took countless civilians, including catholic bishop Father Teresito Suganob, as hostage.

Perturbed by the prospect of a full-scale terror contagion across the country, Duterte decided to cut his Russian trip short and declared (May 24) Martial Law across the entire island. In many ways, it was a desperate containment strategy, exposing the inability of the Philippine government to preempt and prevent a large-scale terror attack under

standard constitutional procedures. With local police forces completely overwhelmed, the government began to rely on the military, which quickly resorted to air raids and large deployment of troops across Marawi. The ensuing clashes created a large-scale humanitarian crisis, driving as many as 400 thousand individuals -- almost the entirety of the city's population -- into refugee camps. Soon, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) found itself in the middle of a tortuous urban warfare campaign, with the militants ably deploying cutting-edge insurgency tactics against a conventional military force.

Within weeks, concerns over civilian casualties and friendly fire compelled the Philippine government to solicit the assistance of external parties, particularly the United States. Overtime, other regional states, including Australia, Singapore, and China, also pitched in. Throughout the region and beyond, the Philippines is (once again) increasingly seen as the 'weak link' in East Asia, with Mindanao providing a potentially long-term haven for global jihadist movements, including the Islamic State. As of this writing, the Battle of Marawi has entered its third month, with just over 70 militants managing to keep many as 7000 troops at bay.⁽³⁾ This has considerably raised the morale and prestige of extremist militants not only in southern Philippines, but also across Southeast Asia. There are fears of a new reign of transnational terror in the region. The crisis in Mindanao is a perfect storm, which marks the intersection of three key factors, both exogenous (externally-driven) and endogenous (internally-driven).

Genealogy of Terror

First, it reflects the IS command's pivot to Asia, as the group grapples with growing military reversals in western Iraq and eastern Syria. This has been largely due to concerted efforts by both regional as well as international powers, particularly the United States and Russia, which have stepped up their anti-IS operations across the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, Turkey's decision to tighten its borders with Syria has also made Hijra (migration) to the Caliphate, the IS' heartland, increasingly difficult if not impossible. Amid a deteriorating strategic landscape in the Middle East, the IS leadership has been forced to shift its strategy. Instead of focusing on consolidating and expanding the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, it began seeking alternative havens and stepped up its global footprint. The shift in strategy (now focusing on 'far enemies' beyond 'near enemies') was increasingly explicit in the IS' publication organ, the Dabiq magazine, which began covering topics such as "From the Battles of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions", "The Failed Crusade", and "Just Terror".⁽⁴⁾

The IS' new strategic doctrine, a product of changing circumstance on the ground, had three elements: (i) high-profile terror attacks against prime targets in the West and major capitals around the world à la al-Qaeda (AQ); (ii) expansion of 'lone wolf' operations against Kafir (infidel) regimes, which mostly involved some element of coordination with and logistical support from the IS command; and, crucially, (iii) the

establishment of Wilayats (governorates) across the developing world, particularly in Muslim-majority regions of Africa and Asia. Since the 1990s, Mindanao has been a particularly attractive target for transnational terror groups, ranging from al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which established operational presence in the area in the 1990s and early-2000s, to the IS in more recent years.

After all, the island has porous borders with Muslim-majority nations of Malaysia and Indonesia. It is bedeviled by failing state institutions after four decades of continuous conflict; and hosts a number of revolutionary and militant groups that have carved out their own respective safe zones beyond the reach of the state. Also, it has been an incubator of deep-seated grievance among the Muslim minority population, who suffer from socio-cultural marginalisation and among the lowest living standards in the country, thus a potentially rich pool for recruitment and mobilisation. Both military and independent sources have indicated that the IS leadership in Syria (Raqqah) provided direct support to the Philippine-based militants in Mindanao, who laid siege on Marawi. As one authoritative study put it: "The Marawi operations received direct funding from ISIS... Tactical decisions on the ground are being made by the Philippine ISIS commanders themselves, but the Syria-based Southeast Asians could have a say in setting strategy for region when the siege is over."

Between July and August 2014, various Jihadist groups in Mindanao pledged Bayah (allegiance) to the IS leadership. This was hoped to leverage the ideological appeal and organisational acumen of the Raqqah-based organisation in order to establish Sharia-based rule in southern Philippines. By 2016, they openly received full recognition by the IS leadership, which designated them as the harbingers of a Daulah Islamiyah Wilayatul Mashriq (Islamic State – Eastern Region) under the overall leadership of Isnilon Hapilon. Hapilon assumed the title of Emir of a prospective Wilayat in Southeast Asia. The only thing missing for a full-fledged Wilayat was actual and substantial territory and population. The IS-led coalition is composed of disparate group of extremist militants spread across maritime and mainland Mindanao (See figure 1). It includes lesser-known groups such as Khilafa Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM) and Anshar Khalifa Philippines (AKP) as well as better-known elements such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which is active in Sulu and Celebes Sea areas, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), which is active in Maguindanao, the stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Maute Group was a relatively newcomer to the coalition, but rapidly rose through the ranks, thanks to its organizational strength, resources, the ambitious leadership of the Maute brothers (Abdullah and Omarkhayam), and its geographical stronghold, Lanao Del Sur, where Marawi is located. These groups have managed to put aside their clan, personal and tactical differences aside under the flag of IS, which has injected new vigor and sense of mission into the hearts and minds of regional militants.

Peace Process in Tatters

Between 2002 and 2015, intensive counter-terror cooperation between the Philippine government and the United States severely undermined the operational capabilities of various militant groups, including the notorious the ASG, a splinter faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). But recent years have seen a shift in their fortunes. This is partly due to the second factor, namely the deadlock in peace negotiations between the government and major Muslim rebel groups in the Philippines, which perilously coincided with the IS' pivot to the East. After years of increasingly hopeful talks between the Benigno Aquino administration (2010-2016) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leadership, which boasts as many as 12 thousand soldiers among its ranks, the peace process was torpedoed by the Mamasapano massacre in January 2015. The incident involved deadly clashes between Philippine National Police Special Action Forces (SAF) and a mixture of MILF and its hardliner splinter faction, the BIFF.(5)

The upshot was the virtual collapse of public and legislative support for the whole peace process, the Aquino administration's biggest political crisis, and the subsequent non-passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) – a crucial element in the creation of an autonomous Muslim-majority sub-state in Mindanao. The breakdown in peace talks provided a perfect opportunity for extremist militant groups to recruit not only among the aggrieved Muslim population, which bemoan chronic poverty and protracted conflict, but also the hardliner elements within the MILF's rank and file, which began to lose confidence in the peace process. As one expert put it, in 2016 "the Maute family initially organized an army of at least 300 ISIS fighters recruited from disgruntled members of families previously associated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)."(6)

The final factor is President Rodrigo Duterte's almost single-minded focus on his controversial campaign against illegal drugs. Throughout his first six months in office, the tough-talking president oversaw a brutal crackdown on suspected drug users and pushers, which drew widespread condemnation among human rights groups, liberal media, and the international community, including key Philippine allies in the West. The nationwide war on drugs overstretched the finite intelligence, fiscal, and manpower resources of the defense establishment.(7) Months ahead of the operation, the Maute Group managed to build a network of underground tunnels and prepositioned equipment in key areas across Marawi. Local militants also managed to receive financial and logistical support from the IS command via Indonesian middlemen. Foreign militants seem to have also slipped through immigration authorities before joining the Battle of Marawi. All of these factors suggest a measure of counter-terror intelligence and law enforcement failure on the part of the Philippine government, which consistently adopted a relatively dismissive attitude and public language towards the threat of IS in the country.(8)

The Stormy Path Ahead

The AFP heavily struggled against the urban warfare campaign in Marawi, which increasingly resembled the horrific scenes in Mosul and Aleppo in past years. Within first few weeks of intense clashes, much of the city was left in ruins. The militants' usage of strategically deployed snipers and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) inflicted heavy casualties on the military and significantly slowed down the movement of the AFP. Some reports suggested the presence of veteran fighters from the Arabian Peninsula and the Russian Caucasus among Maute's ranks, raising fears of a full internationalization of the invasion of Marawi.(9)

As the Duterte administration struggled to cope with the challenge, the Department of National Defense (DND) sought the assistance of Pentagon. As a result, the Pentagon proceeded to deploy a Special Forces unit, released a new cache of weapons, and provided real-time intelligence through state-of-the-art drones. The two allies also conducted joint naval drills in the Sulu and Celebes Sea aimed at containing threats from ASG and other IS-affiliated groups. These groups which have been engaged in widespread kidnap-and-ransom operations in the area. Apparently, Duterte, who has sought closer ties with Beijing at the expense of Washington, was not even consulted by defense officials beforehand. But the Filipino president had to reluctantly agree: "This is really their sentiment, our soldiers are really pro-American, that I cannot deny."(10)

Soon after, other strategic allies also pitched in, with Australia deploying P3 Orion military surveillance planes to aid intelligence gathering against militant groups. Asian neighbors also came to the Philippines' assistance. Singapore donated cargo planes and drones. China offered an unprecedented defense aid package of \$12 million. Manila has also discussed intelligence-sharing agreements and joint naval exercises with both Beijing and Moscow. Meanwhile, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines stepped up their joint patrols in their porous maritime borders. They also discussed new cooperative arrangements aimed at more effective intelligence sharing and countering IS ideology in the cyberspace.(11)

If and when the Philippines, with assistance from its allies, manages to wrest back control of Marawi, there are three important challenges ahead. First, the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Marawi, lest the IS finds even a greater pool of aggrieved and eager recruits in the devastated city. Second, the passage of a revised version of the BBL, which seems more amenable to both parties and has a good chance of passing through the Congress, which is dominated by Duterte's allies. The revival of the peace process and the creation of a Bangsamoro sub-state entity would go a long way in ensuring stronger joint government-MILF cooperation against IS-affiliated groups and address the socio-cultural and political grievances of the Muslim minority. Finally, the government

will have to foster peaceful and inclusive relations between the Muslim minority and the broader population amid the IS' 'clash of civilizations' narrative aimed at stoking tensions between the two religious communities. Without a doubt, this will be an uphill battle.

The Mindanao conundrum reflects the IS' pivot to Asia, deep-seated grievances in Mindanao, the breakdown in peace negotiations between the government and major rebel groups, and lack of focus and preparedness by the Duterte administration. Thus, it underscores the urgency of a comprehensive response, which takes into consideration both structural and proximate causes of the crisis with maximum assistance from allies and neighbors.

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