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No. 044/2013 dated 12 March 2013

The Sabah-Sulu Crisis: Time to revisit the Sulu Zone?

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

The Sabah-Sulu crisis has rekindled a dormant territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines. While much discussion is fixated on the legal and historical aspects of the crisis, there is less attention on the underlying socio-cultural and security milieu.

Commentary

ON 14 February 2013, an estimated 200-300 Filipino followers of Jamalul Kiram III were cornered in the village of Tanduo in Lahad Datu, Sabah in East Malaysia. Calling themselves the “Royal Sulu Army” (RSA), the men, some of them armed with assault rifles, claimed that they were merely returning to their ancestral homeland that they have “rented” to Malaysia. Tensions boiled over with the 1 March gunfight between the RSA and Malaysian security forces which killed more than a dozen RSA men and Malaysian police. Four days later, a joint military-police operation, Ops Daulat, saw the use of fighter aircraft as a prelude to a ground assault.

Daulat is still ongoing with casualty figures expected to rise. With the end-state of the clashes still unclear, rhetoric from both Kuala Lumpur and Manila remain fraught with tension. The historical claims to Sabah must be viewed in the context of contemporary reality: the diffuse border between the Southern Philippines and East Malaysia.

The Sulu Zone

In 1981, James Francis Warren coined the phrase “The Sulu Zone” to refer to the contiguous region set against the Sulu and Celebes Seas and hemmed in by Sulu, Palawan, Western Mindanao and North Borneo. Warren notes that the Zone is not in particular reference to the Sultanate, but to the complex patterns of trade and interaction between kingdoms, vassal states, warlords, traders, and even slave merchants. Differing historical accounts (i.e. tarsilas) of the various sultanates give varying pictures of the degree of influence and majesty they exercised.

In effect, the Sulu Zone comprised present Southeast Asia—an area deemed by contemporary scholar Farish Noor as being “between a fluid region and a hard state”. To illustrate, the southern Philippine islands of Tawi-tawi (from which Kiram III’s followers sailed) are substantially closer to east Sabah, Malaysia than Western Mindanao. “Sabah rice” is a popular fixture in markets of Simunul and Sitangkai. Dried fish, fruits, and vegetables cross the border with nary a second look from either the Philippine Navy or the Royal Malaysian

Navy ships cutting through the waters of the Sulu Zone. Extended families who reside on either side of the border are a common sight, with cross-border movement seen as a mundane commute.

The southern backdoor

But not all flows are benign. The “open”-ness of the zone is exploited by various unscrupulous parties such as small arms “ant-traders”, smugglers, pirates, and terrorist groups. Lino Miani points out that small-scale arms trafficking persists in the Sulu Zone, with their combined volume making what he dubs as the “Sulu Arms Market” (SAM) - one of the hotspots in the world. Weapons from areas wracked by internal conflict—as far as Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia have traversed the SAM owing to the area’s diffuseness.

A more overt manifestation of the transnational challenges facing the Sulu Zone is the Sipadan Island kidnappings of 2000 perpetrated by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The incident saw the Philippine-based terrorists seizing 21 people from the Malaysian resort island. Of course, the various armed groups in Mindanao, of which the ASG is but one, have different ideologies and goals.

What they share is their ability to exploit the existing milieu in the area. The Philippine segment of the Sulu Zone is known to Manila policymakers as “the southern backdoor”, with its relative state of underdevelopment and limited governance. Small arms proliferation is one manifestation of this prevailing condition. Some estimates peg the number of loose firearms in Jolo, Sulu at a high of 100,000.

Guns provide the leverage for any organised group to exercise coercion, regardless of their motivation. The Armed Forces of the Philippines’ (AFP) involvement in counterinsurgency activities, along with other law enforcement agencies, has limited Manila’s ability to prevent illicit flows and movements.

South meets East

Sans the historical claims to Sabah, it is therefore unsurprising that cross-border violence by non-state actors will occur. Small arms proliferation and insecurity combine to provide a volatile cocktail, enabling groups and individuals to engage in political spectacle and theatre. The continually changing discourse of Kiram’s III justifications for the RSA’s entry into Lahad Datu is a case in point. It was at first couched in terms of a return to their ancestral homeland, then as a claim for “the Filipino people”, then as a “private matter” between the Sultanate and the Malaysian government. Throughout, Kiram III stressed the peaceful manner of their actions with violence and death purportedly a last resort, notwithstanding the RSA’s possession of arms.

Whether this flexibility in motivations and justifications are a result of fickle-mindedness is a separate question altogether. From an operational and tactical perspective, shifting discourse may imply a latent appreciation (or miscalculation) of the RSA of the repertoires of action that they deem were available to them. The proximity of Lahad Datu to Tawi-tawi means that in a peaceful scenario, akin to a sit-down occupation of a Sabah kampung, the RSA may be able to rely on a follow-on stream of boatloads of supporters.

In a violent scenario as is unfolding now, the RSA probably assumes that it can either slip in additional manpower or weapons to sustain a fight; or to take flight in watercraft that they used to reach Sabah. Simply put, any group which may have a prospective desire for violence can leverage upon the permissive environment where “south” meets “east”.

A regional response?

Regardless of how the historical claims to Sabah will be resolved, it is certain that the Sulu Zone as a geopolitical concept will remain an important factor in attaining security in Southeast Asia. Responses cannot be limited to the national initiatives without consideration of wider contexts. Perhaps the idea of the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) first launched in 1994, or something similar could be revisited to buttress constructive engagement in the sub-region.

Caution must be exercised to ensure that the Sulu Zone’s intrinsic ability to foster trade and communication not be stymied by the imperatives of security. At the same time, narratives and history should not be exploited to justify violence.

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