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No. 063/2013 dated 15 April 2013

The Sabah Incursion: Gaps in Regional Maritime Security

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Synopsis

The Sabah incursion by Filipino gunmen reflects a lack of effective maritime security of the littoral states. Closer security cooperation is required to address such problems in future.

Commentary

THE INCURSION by an armed Filipino rroup in the eastern coast of Sabah in February-March has exposed major gaps in Southeast Asian maritime security. Self-styling themselves as the “Royal Security Forces of the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo,” the group moved from the southern Philippines in motor boats to enforce their claim on the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo Island.

The standoff began on 11 February 2013 when the self-proclaimed Sultan of the Sulu Sultanate, Jamalul Kiram III, sent the group comprising hundreds of gunmen to Sabah to enforce their claims. They landed and holed up in the coastal district of Lahad Datu and adjacent areas until the Malaysian authorities discovered their intrusion and surrounded them, while Manila sent navy ships to prevent further incursions.

The “transditional” nexus

Despite efforts by the Malaysian and Philippines authorities to resolve the situation, bloodshed was inevitable as the Malaysian armed forces and police met the gunmen’s force with force after a three-week long standoff. Some 62 of the intruders and eight Malaysian police were killed and scores of suspects were rounded up.

There were fears that the incident could chill bilateral relations between Kuala Lumpur and Manila and undermine the ongoing peace talks to end the separatist conflict in Mindanao, facilitated by Malaysia. The incursion also encouraged some quarters in the Philippines to resurrect the dormant claim to Sabah. Furthermore, it was feared that the 800,000 strong Sabah-based Filipino community would sympathise with the group, which could potentially trigger a wider unrest engulfing the entire Sabah and Sulu archipelago.

The Sabah standoff and showdown highlighted the convoluted nature of regional maritime security problems which often combine both transnational and traditional dimensions. The Sulu-Sulawesi Seas area is notorious for transnational crimes, such that the United States government labelled the area as a “terrorist transit triangle” (T3), where terrorists often sought refuge and resources. In April 2000, six armed men believed to be members

of a Mindanao-based terrorist group kidnapped 20 people, including 10 tourists, from Sipadan Island in Sulawesi Sea.

Compounding the problem is the persistent issue of unresolved territorial disputes. Besides the Sabah dispute, Indonesia and Malaysia are also in a deadlock over a dispute in the Sulawesi Sea, known as the Ambalat Block, or Block ND6/ND7, which triggered skirmishes between navies of the two nations.

Such challenges have created a nexus of “transnational” and “traditional” maritime security – or “transditional” - problems for the littoral states to tackle. On one hand, transnational problems prod littoral states to cooperate to protect their maritime borders. The Sabah standoff could largely be blamed on lapses in the littoral states’ ability to effectively monitor their maritime domain. On the other hand, had there been a continuous and cooperative presence of maritime authorities from both countries, the incident would not have happened, or at least could have been prevented at sea.

Three lessons

Maritime security cooperation in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas area is relatively under-developed compared to the Malacca Strait, perhaps owing to the lesser commercial and strategic interests involved. Moreover, the porous maritime border is frequently used by irregular migrants moving back and forth from Sabah. Yet the area is also where some of the region’s most wanted terrorists once found their sympathetic refuge. There is a “traditional” trust deficit which deters states from cooperating in disputed areas with their fellow claimants.

For Manila, the lingering Philippine claim to Sabah, although downplayed since the Marcos era, remains to some extent a thorn in bilateral relations. Malaysia also harbours continuing suspicions about Manila’s motivations that are based on the belief that armed groups in the Philippines have received support as “proxies” in the past.

Three lessons could be drawn from the Sabah standoff. Firstly, it demonstrated that diplomatic ties in the region can still be affected by dormant sovereignty issues, and quite unexpectedly. Despite cordial relations between Manila and Kuala Lumpur, nationalist sentiments often come to the fore in the public consciousness whenever it comes to sovereignty. Such sentiments adversely contribute to the trust deficit inhibiting security cooperation.

Secondly, the standoff exemplifies a classic maritime security case which blurs the line between transnational and traditional problems. This means that cooperation is often undertaken reluctantly, if at all. Tensions in disputed waters and islands are worsened by nationalist activists making illegal landings, such in the Senkaku/Diayou Islands in August 2012. Such action could lead to overreaction by overzealous security authorities, further inflaming tensions.

Lastly, the standoff highlighted laxity in the littoral states’ maritime domain awareness capacity and cooperation. Enhancing situational awareness drains scarce resources (people, money, and equipment). Manila and Kuala Lumpur have made strides through the Joint Committee on Border Cooperation (JCBC) to manage and coordinate maritime patrols conducted along their common maritime border.

However, to be effective, their frequency needs to be increased. In this regard the presence of air elements in maritime surveillance is also crucial as the Malacca Strait Patrols between the navies of Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have demonstrated.

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