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Attacks in Central Mindanao: Overestimating the Bangsamoro Splinter Group

By Joseph Franco

Synopsis

Attacks attributed to the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Mindanao have raised concerns of possible implications on the negotiations between the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). A calibrated response to the BIFF - an MILF splinter group - is necessary to protect the gains in the peace process.

Commentary

THE 13 JULY 2013 signing of the Annex on Wealth Sharing and Revenue Generation between the Philippine government (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was hailed as a major milestone towards a Final Peace Agreement (FPA) and the creation of a new autonomous entity of Bangsamoro. Attacks launched by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), an MILF splinter, before and after the Annex signing has stoked fears of continued conflict in Mindanao even after peace with the MILF.

The skirmishes caused a short-lived closure of a national highway and displaced civilians. The 26 July bombing of Kyla's Bar in Cagayan De Oro City (CDO) that killed eight and injured 46 have already been attributed to the BIFF in spite of an ongoing investigation. Some pundits in Manila are already dismissing a prospective GPH-MILF peace pact. This chorus of pessimism has been echoed – somewhat prematurely - in anonymous “risk control” assessments cited by the Philippine media.

Contesting the critics

Localised conflict drivers in Central Mindanao contest the prevailing paradigm in both the local and overseas press that the BIFF is most likely plotting with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) to bomb the urban areas in Mindanao. Based in the hinterlands of Central Mindanao, the BIFF does not have the networks in place to operate in urban areas which were previous JI and ASG targets. Deploying resources for an urban terrorism campaign would only strain the BIFF's already limited resources and is anathema to its erstwhile doctrine.

Aside from setting back the GPH-MILF peace process, overstating the BIFF's links to the ASG and the JI can lead to the wrong responses. The threat posed by the ASG and JI will not be addressed by scouring Central Mindanao for purported training camps but by focusing efforts in the islands of Basilan and Sulu off the coast of Western Mindanao. In fact, a heavy-handed response can unduly stress existing mechanisms between the

GPH and MILF to broker peace and resolve conflict. Conversely, the more kinetic - or armed - approaches used to target JI and ASG operatives would not suffice to address the more socio-economic motivations of the BIFF's rank and file.

Latent tensions also exist between Islamist militant groups such as the JI and ASG, and secessionist movements like the BIFF and the MILF. The MILF has eschewed involvement with the Islamist groups as early as 2003 to legitimise itself as a political movement that can be negotiated with. A largely unheard of strategic special operation, *Oplan Tornado*, was launched in 2005 by the Philippine military to hunt high-value ASG and JI targets, effectively dismantling the networks and camps they have established in Central Mindanao.

An overblown threat

Casting the BIFF as an existential threat to the GPH-MILF peace process ignores the underlying motivations of its leader, Ameril Umbra Kato. A former chief of the MILF's 105th Base Command, Kato was expelled for opposing the GPH-MILF peace process. Taking with him 300 men from his former command, Kato organised the BIFF to wage his own personal crusade in his traditional and very specific area of influence: the provincial boundary between North Cotabato and Maguindanao delineated by the Rio Grande River.

The parochial leanings of Kato are obvious as most clashes between his forces and pro-government militia are due to the former's attempts to extort from local farmers. Another modus operandi used by Kato's forces are raids to seize farm produce and livestock. The topology and climate of the BIFF's areas of influence, centred on a few villages in Maguindanao, also limit the courses of action available to Kato's men and explains the spasmodic nature of his attacks. Attacks by Kato's men are often launched during the rice harvest season, when supplies are available to sustain their operations.

This operational limit is consistent with the inability of Southern Philippine secessionist groups to launch expeditionary attacks away from their encampments. A protracted campaign is also unsustainable for Kato given the relative flatness of the terrain around the Rio Grande River. This allows the Philippine military to use combat assets such as mechanised infantry against the BIFF that would have otherwise been less effective in other areas of Mindanao.

Guarding against policy dissonance

There is no question that the BIFF threat must be addressed - but as a local "lawless armed group" as categorised by Philippine security forces. Divorcing the BIFF from its context could lead to the re-emergence of national discourse especially in Manila, which seeks to dismiss the peace negotiations with the MILF as appeasement. The ability of national discourse to undermine local initiatives to maintain the ceasefire is not without precedent as seen in the near collapse of the GPH-MILF talks in 2008.

At present, Philippine online forums and social media pages are already abuzz with simplistic and erroneous claims that the BIFF is an adjunct of the MILF. The explosion at Kyla's Bar is being linked to the BIFF notwithstanding the equal possibility of local electoral politics as a motive for the attack.

The challenge therefore is for Manila to pursue a nuanced approach against the BIFF. A misstep in handling the BIFF, during a critical juncture in the GPH-MILF talks, can reignite conflict in Mindanao – something that must be avoided for the sake of achieving permanent peace.

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