

US-Philippine Defense Cooperation for Maritime Security

By Jennifer Oreta, PhD

The chief maritime security concerns in contemporary Southeast Asia are piracy, terrorism at sea, and China's seizure of contested islands in the South China Sea. Maritime security encompasses the protection and safety of vessels from terrorism, sea robbery, and piracy; it is also about ensuring that navigation is free from illegal activities.

Piracy and sea robbery. The Straits of Malacca, and the complementary passages through the Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits, are among Southeast Asia's busiest international shipping routes. Securing these routes is a challenge. During the late 1990s into the early 2000s, piracy and sea robbery attacks in Southeast Asian waters occurred with alarming frequency. In 2003 alone, there were 189 piracy attacks in Southeast Asian waters. The Regional Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which was born from a 2001 Japanese anti-piracy initiative, was launched in 2016. Closer cooperation under ReCAAP led to a significant decrease in criminal activities. In 2020, ReCAAP reported ninety-five incidents of piracy, a notable decrease from the early 2000s. However, ReCAAP does not consider attacks at sea with terroristic or political aim as acts of piracy, thereby excluding some security concerns from its purview.

Terrorism. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, attention shifted from piracy to counterterrorism. In Southeast Asia (SEA), the possibility of pirates and terrorist groups conspiring to stage seaborne attacks became a major concern. Jemaah Islamiya (JI) and Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) of Indonesia, and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) of the Philippines, were the focus of these concerns. Per the 9/11 Commission Report, intelligence units discovered that plans for the attack were hatched in the Philippines and Malaysia, dubbed as Operation Bojinka. This information strengthened interest in how Southeast Asian states address violent extremist organizations.

Under the Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines, the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) began operations in February 2002 as a US platform to help the Philippines address domestic and transnational terrorism. The JSOTF-P offered operational advice and support against terrorist groups and assisted with operations to reduce grassroots support for ASG within the group's base of operations on the Basilan and Sulu islands. JSOTF-P ended in February 2015, with both the Philippine and US government agreeing that the goals of the mission had been met.

After JSOTF-P ended, the siege of Marawi city happened in 2017, led by a coalition of ISIS groups, *Daulah Islamiya Wilayatul Mashriq (DIWM)*. This spurred multilateral Southeast Asian maritime security efforts. The siege highlighted the critical weakness of border security in the Sulu Sea Triangle as foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) from Malaysia and Indonesia exploited backdoor channels to enter the Philippines and join DIWM. This issue hastened the signing of the Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) and Trilateral Air Patrol (TAP) agreements that the three countries had been discussing since May 2016. TMP and TAP were launched in 2017 largely to combat the movement of FTFs; the strategic effectiveness of the effort has yet to be seen.

China's island building in disputed waters. The US and the Philippines signed a Military Bases Agreement in 1947 and the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) in 1951. While the MDT is still in force, the US Bases treaty expired in 1991 bringing about the closure of a number of US military bases and the exodus of US military personnel from the Philippines. As the Philippine Navy relied heavily on US forces' matériel, the departure vitally weakened the

Jennifer Oreta, coordinator of Ateneo Initiative for Southeast Asian Studies, and Asst Prof of the Department of Political Science, Ateneo de Manila University Philippines, explains that "[t]he chief maritime security concerns in contemporary Southeast Asia are

nation's maritime capabilities. The power vacuum in an area that previously hosted an overwhelming US Naval presence created an opportunity for China to assert dominance in Southeast Asia's contested maritime domain.

In 1994, China occupied and began building structures in the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef, which is a part of the Spratly Islands. The Philippines' claim on the Islands is based on Presidential decree No. 1596 issued in June 1978 by President Marcos. Conversely, China claims the entire South China Sea (SCS), including the Spratly Islands, based on a 1947 Chinese map that marks the areas with a nine-dash line. [According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative \(AMTI\)](#), China has developed twenty-seven outposts in the South China Sea and controls the Scarborough Shoal. China forcibly took the shoal after a standoff with the Philippines in 2012. In response, the Philippines filed a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. While the court ruled in favor of the Philippines in 2016 rejecting China's nine-dash line, China retains control of the shoal and has yet to cease its aggressive behavior in SCS.

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Observers believe that Chinese activities in contested waters accelerated renewed US-Philippines defense cooperation leading to the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the subsequent 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Current US-Philippine joint military exercises seek to improve interoperability. These exercises also convey that, legal requirements notwithstanding, the allies are operationally ready to uphold the collective security tenets of the MDT. The United States has also committed to supporting a more credible Philippine defense posture to address a wide array of issues, including smuggling and terrorism, according to the [U.S. Building Maritime Capacity in Southeast Asia Fact Sheet](#).

On the regional level, the lexicon of maritime security went mainstream among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members in the early 2000s. Maritime Security was the focus of the 2013 and 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue. The 2025 ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint makes multiple mentions of maritime security, including commitments to "enhance maritime security and promote maritime cooperation in ASEAN." At the event in 2015, the United States announced its Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative, which [a US Department of Defense document](#) designates as an "effort to build greater regional capacity to address a range of maritime challenges."

Despite the glaring importance of maritime security in the region's stability, [a report by AMTI](#) highlights that the region has "no commonly accepted definition for maritime security. Among Southeast Asia's key coastal states, only the governments of the Philippines and Thailand have officially defined maritime security." Maritime security may be regarded as critical by peninsular Southeast Asia, but the urgency is not necessarily shared by insular states. Moreover, US and China's influence and impact on individual states are different, and this affects and shapes how states view maritime security.

To protect the maritime security agenda of the US and the Philippines, i.e., primacy of the rule of law in the maritime domain, counter terrorism at sea, and freedom of navigation in SCS, a balanced and strategic approach is needed to: (a) forge a consensus especially with coastal states in ASEAN on the definition and scope of maritime security; (b) enhance cooperation with stakeholders against piracy, armed robbery, and terrorism; and (c) maximize the gains of the 2016 Hague Tribunal ruling to engage and challenge China's 9-dash line claim in the South China Sea.

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