



# Maritime Malice in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines: The Asymmetric Maritime Threat at the Tri-Border Area

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# Introduction

Terrorism declined in 2020, partially due to travel restrictions imposed to curtail the spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> The imposition of border controls and global lockdowns has reduced the operational capability of terrorist groups.<sup>2</sup> However, as countries are preparing to reopen their borders after developing and distributing the COVID-19 vaccines, transnational terrorism may resurface towards the latter half of 2021 once international borders reopen and lockdowns are lifted. In Southeast Asia, the Sulu-Celebes Sea has been the hotbed for crime, piracy, and terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise known as the Tri-Border Area (TBA)<sup>4</sup> fringed by Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, Islamist terrorists have exploited the porous borders to supplement conflict zones in Southeast Asia with foreign fighters.

The Sulu-Celebes Sea connects Borneo and Sulawesi to Mindanao through a long chain of islands. Sabah and Davao Occidental's vast coastlines create multiple entries and exit points to and from the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Terrorist groups' access to the seas is a threat multiplier, as it diversifies their avenues for fundraising and improves their survivability.<sup>6</sup> The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is one of three terrorist groups today that possesses maritime capabilities (the others are al-Shabaab from Somalia<sup>7</sup> and Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah from Mozambique.)<sup>8</sup> ASG operates along the Sulu Archipelago, which connects Borneo Island to Mindanao. Notorious for its brutal kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) tactics, it has disrupted many seafarers' lives and livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> Hence, as governments prepare to reopen borders to resuscitate their economies, the authorities must re-examine their border security policies and practices in the TBA.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the key maritime terrorism threats in the Sulu-Celebes Seas, the weaknesses of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) – a trilateral treaty between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines that was intended to address the threat in the region, – and provide key policy recommendations to mitigate the weaknesses in the TCA. To achieve this, the authors have structured the paper into five parts: the first two sections explore the threat of terrorism in the Sulu-Celebes Sea, and highlight the weaknesses of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement. In the third part, we consider the dilemma between sovereignty and counter-terrorism, followed by an exploration of the threat of radicalisation in the TBA region. The final part of the paper provides relevant and timely policy recommendations aimed at policymakers and practitioners in the area.

1 Kumar Ramakrishna, 'The Global Threat Landscape in 2020', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (2021): 1–13.

2 Ibid., 8.

3 Senia Febrica, 'Securing the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Maritime Terrorism: A Troublesome Cooperation?', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (23 June 2014), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/347>.

4 Jasmin Singh and Muhammad Haziq bin Jani, 'The Tri-Border Area: Jihadi Epicentre in Southeast Asia', *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 186 (20 July 2016): 3.

5 Prashanth Parameswaran, 'Confronting Threats in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas: Opportunities and Challenges', *The Diplomat* (blog), 10 June 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/confronting-threats-in-the-sulu-sulawesi-seas-opportunities-and-challenges/>.

6 Kenneth Yeo, 'Kidnapping in the Sulu Sea: Implications on Terrorism in the Philippines', *The Diplomat*, 4 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/kidnapping-in-the-sulu-sea-implications-on-terrorism-in-the-philippines/>.

7 Currin Singh and Arjun Singh Bedi, 'War on Piracy: The Conflation of Somali Piracy with Terrorism in Discourse, Tactic, and Law', *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 5 (2016): 440–58.

8 Jan Gerber, 'EXPLAINER | What's behind the "ISIS" Attacks in Mozambique and How Does It Affect SA?', *News24*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/explainer-whats-behind-the-isis-attacks-in-mozambique-and-how-does-it-affect-sa-20200711>.

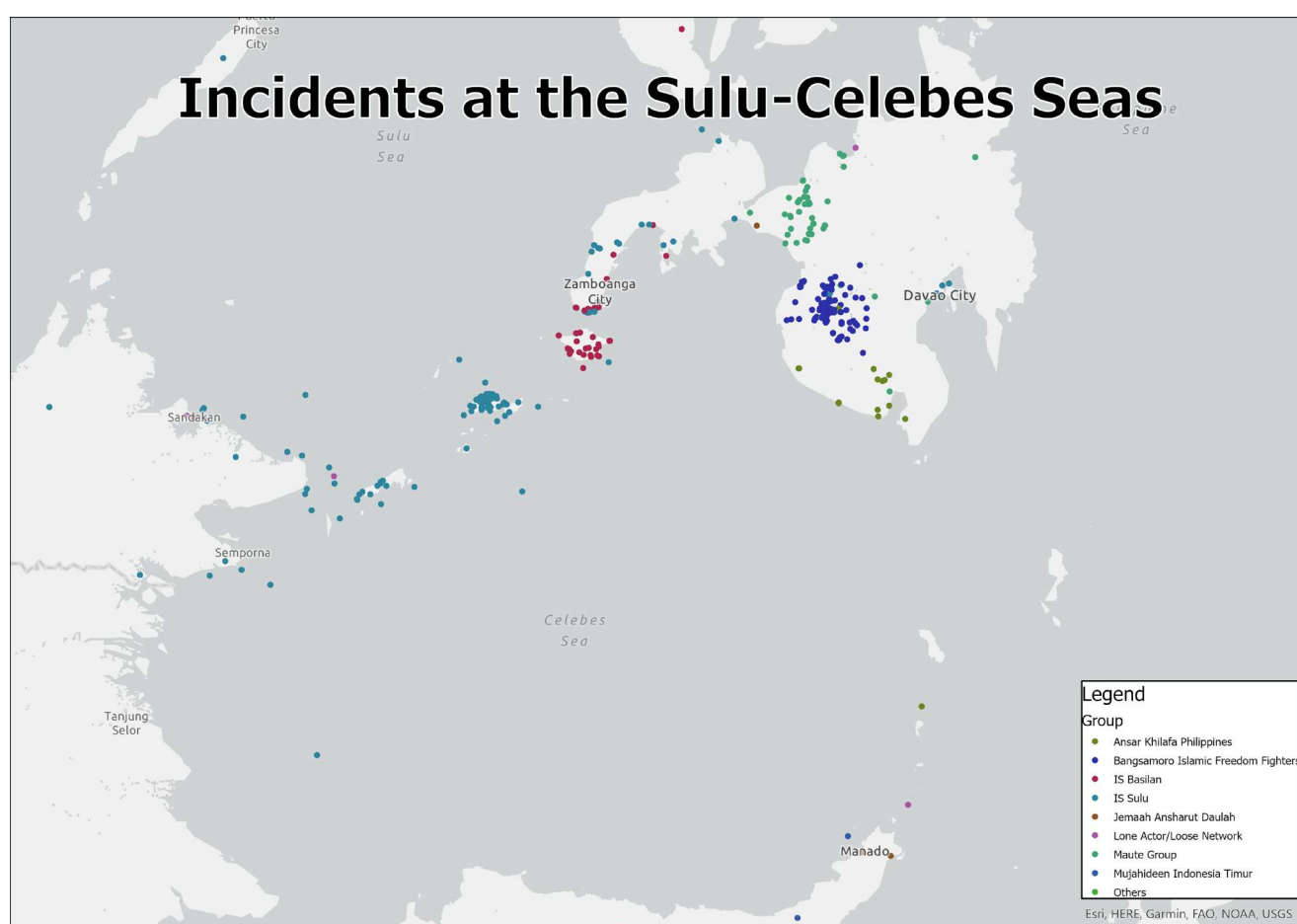
9 Alexandra Amling et al., 'Stable Seas: Sulu-Celebes Seas', *One Earth Future Foundation*, February 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/OEF.2019.034>.

## Terrorist Centre of Gravity for Southeast Asia

The Sulu-Celebes Sea is notoriously known for the ASG's Kidnapping for Ransom (KFR) tactics.<sup>10</sup> The ASG began using KFR after the death of its leader Abdurajak Janjalani in 1998, which severed the financial link between ASG and Al-Qaeda.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent Khadaffy Janjalani-led ASG exploited the weaknesses of the terrain and targeted seafarers and foreign tourists residing in the remote islands of Sulu.<sup>12</sup> Today, coastal and maritime kidnapping continues to plague the seas due to the ASG's asymmetric maritime capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

Besides KFR tactics, the ASG has exploited their asymmetric maritime capabilities to control the flow of terrorist militants, logistics, and funds.<sup>14</sup> Hence, while ASG still conducts illicit activities on land, they can also rely on maritime alternatives, such as hijacking cargo ships to loot and rob from the crew.

**Figure 1:** Incidents at the Sulu-Celebes Seas from 2014 to 2020<sup>15</sup>



10 'IMB report: Sea kidnappings rise in 2016 despite plummeting global piracy', *ICC - International Chamber of Commerce* (blog), 10 January 2017, <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/imb-report-sea-kidnappings-rise-2016-despite-plummeting-global-piracy/>.

11 Stanford University, 'Abu Sayyaf Group I Mapping Militant Organizations', Mapping Militant Organizations, accessed 17 March 2018, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/152>.

12 McKenzie OBrien, 'Fluctuations Between Crime and Terror: The Case of Abu Sayyaf's Kidnapping Activities', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24 (1 April 2012): 320–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.648679>.

13 Yeo, "Kidnapping in the Sulu Sea."; Asyura Salleh, 'Covid-19 Accelerates Maritime Insecurity in the Asia-Pacific', *The Strategist*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/covid-19-accelerates-maritime-insecurity-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

14 Kenneth Yeo, 'Threats along the Sulu Sea: Exploring the Land-Sea Nexus', *Stable Seas* (blog), 12 December 2019, <https://stableseas.org/maritime-terrorism/sulu-sea-threats>.

15 Kenneth Yeo et al., 'Southeast Asia Militant Atlas', *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies: International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, 2021, <https://rsis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=fcadd7b610a944c53fcd0195ff3d09>. (Not published yet)

The archipelagic terrain has improved the survivability of the ASG. Maritime enforcement agencies face problems locating ASG members as they island-hop to avoid arrest.<sup>16</sup> ASG has also utilised the shallow waters and mangroves of the area to outmanoeuvre the authorities.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, they often conduct their kidnappings and sea-jackings in small boats to evade detection from satellite systems and reduce visual exposure to aerial or naval patrols.<sup>18</sup>

The Sulu-Celebes Sea is also the gateway for terrorism into Mindanao. During the al-Qaeda (AQ) era of terrorism in the late 1990s - 2000s, its affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) had sent terrorists from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore into Mindanao for training.<sup>19</sup> Many of them were smuggled into Mindanao through the TBA.<sup>20</sup> The JI continues to pose a significant threat today. A recent statement by Sabah police Commissioner, Hazani Ghazali in February 2021 highlights that Sabah remains a point of recruitment, transit and fundraising for JI members.<sup>21</sup> In fact, between 2014 and 2020, there were 83 individuals arrested in Sabah for suspected involvement in JI activities, of which 38 were locals, 39 were Filipino and eight were Indonesian.<sup>22</sup>

Today, Mindanao is the main battleground of the Islamic State (IS) in Southeast Asia.<sup>23</sup> The authorities have reported that militants were smuggled through the Sulu Archipelago, Sangihe Islands, or Palawan to participate in the 2017 Marawi siege.<sup>24</sup>

In the post-Marawi environment, the Sulu-Celebes Sea remains critical for the survival of terrorist groups in Mindanao. Foreign fighters worldwide continued to enter Mindanao to support IS-affiliated groups such as Abu Sayyaf, Maute Group, Ansharul Khilafah Philippines and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters.<sup>25</sup> The Indonesian couple, Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani Saleh, who conducted the Jolo Cathedral suicide bombing in January 2019, travelled into Mindanao through the Sulu Archipelago.<sup>26</sup> Their daughter, Resky Fantasya Rullie (alias Cici), who also intended to become a suicide bomber, was arrested in August 2020 at Jolo Island, along the Sulu Archipelago.<sup>27</sup>

## The Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA)

Facilitating fundraising, survival, and recruitment of ASG, the Sulu archipelago is arguably the centre of gravity for terrorism in Southeast Asia. The ASG conducted fifteen KFR operations, took 35 hostages, and earned US\$7.3 million from ransom in 2016 alone.<sup>28</sup> This prompted

16 In-person interview with a senior police officer from the Philippines National Police in Singapore, 31 October 2018.

17 Kenneth Yeo, 'Philippines', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Annual Threat Assessment, 11, no. 1 (January 2019): 9–15.

18 Ibid.

19 Justin V. Hastings, *No Man's Land: Globalization, Territory, and Clandestine Groups in Southeast Asia* (NUS Press, 2011).

20 Febrica, 'Securing the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Maritime Terrorism'.

21 "'Bali-Style Bombings Possible in Sabah, Jemaah Islamiyah Suspects Nabbed Last Year'", *Daily Express Newspaper Online*, 20 February 2021, <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/166627/bali-bombing-possible-in-sabah-police/>.

22 Ibid.

23 Bong Sarmiento, 'ISIS Thrives in Covid-19 Shadows in Philippines', *Asia Times*, 22 May 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/isis-thrives-in-covid-19-shadows-in-philippines/>.

24 Zam Yusa, 'Malaysia and Indonesia Foreign Fighter Transit Routes to Philippines Identified', *The Defense Post*, 20 November 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/20/malaysia-indonesia-philippines-foreign-fighters-transit-routes/>.

25 Robert Postings, 'The Philippines: Destination for ISIS Foreign Fighters from Europe and Beyond?', *The Defense Post*, 12 September 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/09/12/philippines-isis-foreign-fighters-europe/>.

26 Ana P. Santos, 'Who Were the Indonesian Husband and Wife behind Jolo Bombing?', *Rappler*, 27 December 2019, <http://www.rappler.com/world/regions/asia-pacific/247991-indonesian-husband-wife-behind-jolo-bombing>.

27 'Philippines Captures Indonesian Woman Suspected of Planning a Suicide Bomb Attack', *Benar News*, 10 October 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine-ph-id-bomber-10102020095644.html>.

28 Jim Gomez, 'Abu Sayyaf Got \$7.3 Million from Kidnappings', *The Jakarta Post*, 27 October 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2016/10/27/abu-sayyaf-got-73-million-from-kidnappings-.html>.

then Indonesian Defence Minister, Ryamizard Ryacudu, to initiate the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) to curtail the kidnapping of seafarers in the region.<sup>29</sup>

The Sulu Archipelago measures approximately 6,100 km from east to west, making it a formidable task for any single country to undertake extensive maritime enforcement. Hence, TCA brings Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines together to jointly patrol the Sulu-Celebes Sea. It is a maritime security coordination and intelligence sharing mechanism that was discussed in 2016 but only established in 2017.<sup>30</sup> Key to these efforts are the joint Maritime Command Centres (MCCs) established in Tarakan (Indonesia), Tawau (Malaysia) and Bongao (Philippines).<sup>31</sup> These MCCs aim to facilitate intelligence sharing and coordinate joint patrol operations among the three countries. While there was a commitment to carry out joint aerial and naval patrols routinely, the frequency of such patrols is unknown.<sup>32</sup>

Member states have improved patrols of the Sulu-Celebes Sea since the TCA was established. Malaysia's Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) has observed some coastal and maritime enforcement successes. ESSCOM claimed to have foiled 40 kidnapping attempts since 2018<sup>33</sup> and arrested 29 IS supporters in Sabah in the same year.<sup>34</sup> ESSCOM has also announced an organisational restructuring to improve the deployment of forces.<sup>35</sup> In May 2019, Indonesia conducted a 10-day coordinated naval patrol operation to curtail maritime crime.<sup>36</sup>

At the Malaysian end, ESSCOM continues to maintain its two forward operating bases in Sabah to boost its security capabilities and has plans to set up another in Semporna in 2024.<sup>37</sup> In November 2020, ESSCOM proposed installing a high-resolution 'big eye' camera in the area to boost security control and surveillance capabilities on top of the existing 'Target Hardening' close-range radar systems that have already been installed in strategic locations in the area.<sup>38</sup> In line with efforts to boost capabilities in the region, the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) and police have proposed establishing an extra armed forces brigade in Kalabakan and two General Operations Force battalions in Kunak and Kudat.<sup>39</sup>

The Malaysian Navy has also deployed Special Forces in the region, upgraded its fleet of small crafts and established two offshore vessels near the Sulu-Celebes Sea as operational hubs.<sup>40</sup>

29 Ryamizard Ryacudu, 'The Need for Joint Counter-Terrorism Frameworks in South-East Asia', *TODAYonline*, 7 November 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/need-joint-counter-terrorism-frameworks-south-east-asia>.

30 Ian Storey, 'Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress', *Perspective*, no. 48 (2018). [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2018\\_48@50.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_48@50.pdf)

31 Prashanth Parameswaran, 'Are Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols Actually Working?', *Wilson Center* (blog), 29 January 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/are-sulu-sea-trilateral-patrols-actually-working>; 'Guidance on Abduction of Crew in the Sulu-Celebes Seas and Waters off Eastern Sabah' (ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, July 2019), 7, [shorturl.at/iHW15](http://shorturl.at/iHW15).

32 Tom Abke, 'Trilateral Air, Maritime Patrols Curtail Kidnappings', *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum* (blog), 3 June 2019, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/06/trilateral-air-maritime-patrols-curtail-kidnappings/>.

33 'Esscom: 40 Kidnapping Attempts Foiled since 2018', *The Star*, 26 January 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/26/esscom-40-kidnapping-attempts-foiled-since-2018>.

34 Ray Sherman and Zam Yusa, 'Malaysia Nabbed Two Dozen Foreign Militant Suspects in Sabah Last Year', *Benar News*, 15 February 2019, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/Malaysia-militants-02152019165222.html>.

35 'IGP: Abu Sayyaf Still Poses a Threat, Esscom to Be Restructured', *The Star*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/06/11/igp-abu-sayyaf-still-poses-a-threat-esscom-to-be-restructured#12EsxS5cSoZf5zfd.99>.

36 Yinglun Shi, 'Philippines, Indonesia Kick off Coordinated Border Naval Patrol', *Xinhua Net*, 2 May 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/02/c\\_138029657.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/02/c_138029657.htm).

37 'IGP: Forward Operating Bases Will Boost Sabah Security', *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)* (blog), 18 April 2016, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2016/04/18/igp-forward-operating-bases-will-boost-sabah-security/>; Olivia Miwil, 'ESSCOM: Semporna Tourist Island to Have Forward Operating Base in 2024', *NST Online*, 5 January 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/01/654580/esscom-semporna-tourist-island-have-forward-operating-base-2024>.

38 'ESSCOM Proposes Installation Of "Big Eye" Camera To Enhance Security', *Borneo Today* (blog), accessed 22 January 2021, <https://www.borneotoday.net/esscom-proposes-installation-of-big-eye-camera-to-enhance-security/>.

39 'ESSCOM Needs to Be Retained, Improved upon, Says Commander', *Malay Mail*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/02/10/esscom-needs-to-be-retained-improved-upon-says-commander/1836307>.

40 Zachary Abuza, 'Maritime Security in Sabah: ESSCOMM On the Rise', *Center for International Maritime Security* (blog), 15



They have recently added eleven Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RHIB) to their light craft fleet.<sup>41</sup> RHIBs are highly manoeuvrable in rough waters and suitable for the maritime landscape of the Sulu-Celebes Sea.<sup>42</sup> The MAF will also be receiving six new light-attack MD 530 G helicopters in 2021 that will be stationed in Sabah to enhance air surveillance capabilities.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, despite the Malaysian claims of reducing maritime crime in the Sulu-Celebes Sea via the TCA, we continue to see ongoing maritime and coastal KFR operations. The joint patrols began in July 2017, after ASG's KFR operations ceased in December 2016.<sup>44</sup> However, after a 21-month hiatus, the ASG resumed their KFR operations in September 2018 despite the enactment of the TCA.<sup>45</sup>

To enhance the assets used to curtail the ASG's maritime operations, the Philippines National Police (PNP) Maritime Group procured 35 high-speed tactical boats in 2019.<sup>46</sup> The PNP supplemented their maritime enforcement capabilities with another 22 high-speed tactical boats, armed with machine guns and automatic grenade launchers, to fortify its territorial waters and improve coastal protection in 2020.<sup>47</sup> Western Mindanao Command (WESMINCOM) used one of such tactical boats to capsize onto the pump boat of the top ASG leader, Mannul Sawadjaan, off a pump boat that killed him and seven other ASG members on 4 November 2020.<sup>48</sup>

## The National Sovereignty and Counter-Terrorism Dilemma

The TCA's weaknesses are often attributed to the absence of the necessary coordinative capacities for joint patrols due to sovereignty claims in the area involving all three countries.<sup>49</sup> The contentious Malaysia-Indonesia and Malaysia-Philippines territorial dispute over the Ambalat block<sup>50</sup> and Sabah<sup>51</sup> may complicate maritime patrol responsibilities. Indonesia has mobilised warships and air squadrons to conduct exercises near the Malaysian borders around the disputed Ambalat area.<sup>52</sup> This exercise was said to hone the coordination of Indonesia's Navy and Air

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August 2019, <http://cimsec.org/maritime-security-in-sabah-esscomm-on-the-rise/41289>.

41 'Navy Receives 11 Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats', *Borneo Post Online*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.theborneopost.com/2020/12/08/navy-receives-11-rigid-hull-inflatable-boats/>.

42 Ibid.

43 Ray Sherman and Nisha David, 'Malaysia Bolsters Security Near Sea Border with Philippines', *BenarNews*, 6 March 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-philippines-03062020184117.html>.

44 Storey, 'Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress', 6.

45 The Straits Times, 'Abu Sayyaf Terror Group Regrouping, Looking to Get Back into Business of Kidnap-for-Ransom', *The Straits Times*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/abu-sayyaf-terror-group-regrouping-looking-to-get-back-into-business-of-kidnap-for>.

46 Aaron Recuenco, 'PNP Deploys High-Speed Tactical Boats vs Abu Sayyaf in BaSulTa', *Manila Bulletin News*, 22 September 2019, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/09/22/pnp-deploys-high-speed-tactical-boats-vs-abu-sayyaf-in-basulta>.

47 Carlo Lorenciana, '22 Cebu-Made Watercraft to Boost PNP Maritime Law Enforcement', *Philippine News Agency*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1118985>.

48 Julie S. Alipala, Kathleen de Villa, and Patricia Denise M. Chiu, 'Top Abu Sayyaf Leader Killed in Sulu Sea Assault', *Inquirer News*, 4 November 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1356196/top-abu-sayyaf-leader-killed-in-sulu-sea-assault>.

49 Storey, 'Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress', 3–4.

50 Stephen C. Druce and Efri Yoni Baikoeni, 'Circumventing Conflict: The Indonesia–Malaysia Ambalat Block Dispute', in *Contemporary Conflicts in Southeast Asia: Towards a New ASEAN Way of Conflict Management*, ed. Mikio Oishi, Asia in Transition (Singapore: Springer, 2016), 137–56, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0042-3\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0042-3_7).

51 Anna Malindog-Uy, 'Sabah: Malaysia's Or Philippines?', *The ASEAN Post* (blog), 8 October 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/sabah-malaysias-or-philippines>.

52 Suriani Mappong Fardah, 'Indonesian Navy, Air Force Conduct Exercise near Malaysia Border Area', *Antara News*, 11 July 2020, sec. Indonesia, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/152194/indonesian-navy-air-force-conduct-exercise-near-malaysia-border-area>.

Force to safeguard their sovereignty.<sup>53</sup> The Philippines has also revived its claims on Sabah although no military action has been taken thus far.<sup>54</sup>

However, beyond the territorial disputes between the three member states of the TCA, they are also troubled by the South China Sea maritime dispute, north of the Sulu-Celebes Sea. Every year, a total of US\$3.37 trillion worth of trade and 40 percent of the global liquefied natural gases pass through the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup> China has claimed territorial sovereignty over 80 percent of the South China Sea based on its 1947 Nine-dashed Lines – an arbitrary line drawn by the Chinese authorities based on “historic rights”.<sup>56</sup> This territorial claim overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

Key disputed territories for the TCA member states are the Natuna Islands, the Seas north of Borneo, the Seas west of Palawan, and the Sabah area. Claimant states have increasingly militarised their naval assets. Indonesia has moved its Navy Combat Squad’s headquarters to the Natuna islands<sup>58</sup>, signalling the priorities of the current administration. In October 2019, then Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Saifuddin Abdullah, shared his concerns on a major encroachment of his country’s maritime territory and indicated that Malaysia would need to upgrade their naval assets to manage their territorial waters better.<sup>59</sup> The Philippines is also building a sea-based para-military force to counter China’s claims in the South China Sea.<sup>60</sup> Recently, there has also been increased military collaborations between the United States and Philippines at the South China Seas after the Chinese navy encircled the Philippines naval assets at Philippines’ territorial waters.<sup>61</sup>

Given limited resources, states would likely prioritise national sovereignty over their counter-terrorism initiatives. Hence, the arms race in the South China Sea could further limit the resources allocated to the TBA. Despite their relative proximity, naval assets deployed to resist China’s naval expansion in the South China Sea cannot be cross-deployed for counter-terrorism or counter-piracy efforts in the TBA due to the variations of terrain in these contested waters. The TBA also comprises of scattered regions of shallow shoals and mangroves.<sup>62</sup> Hence, the blue (deep water and open ocean capabilities) or green water (littoral and nearshore capabilities) military assets deployed to safeguard their interests in the South China Sea by the three TCA countries may not be able to navigate the waters of the Sulu-Celebes Sea.<sup>63</sup>

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53 Ibid.

54 Raissa Robles, ‘Why the Philippines Is Reviving Its Sabah Dispute with Malaysia’, *South China Morning Post*, 17 September 2020, sec. This Week in Asia, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3101844/why-philippines-reviving-its-dispute-malaysia-over-sabah>.

55 ‘How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?’, *ChinaPower Project* (blog), 2 August 2017, <http://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

56 ‘An Interactive Look at Claims on the South China Sea’, *The Straits Times*, 29 February 2016, sec. Singapore news, <https://graphics.straitstimes.com/STI/STIMEDIA/Interactives/2016/02/turf-wars-on-the-south-china-sea/index.html>.

57 Ibid.

58 Erric Permana, ‘Indonesia to Deploy Navy Force near South China Sea’, *Anadolu Agency* (blog), 23 November 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indonesia-to-deploy-navy-force-near-south-china-sea/2053026>.

59 Joseph Sipalan, ‘Malaysia Needs to Be Ready for the Worst in South China Sea: Foreign Minister’, *Reuters*, 17 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-southchinasea-idUSKBN1WW0EU>.

60 Richard Javad Heydarian, ‘Philippines Taking Aim at China’s Sea Militias’, *Asia Times* (blog), 29 October 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/philippines-taking-aim-at-chinas-sea-militias/>.

61 Richard Javad Heydarian, ‘US comes to Philippines’ rescue in South China Sea’, *Asia Times* (blog), 15 April 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/us-comes-to-philippines-rescue-in-south-china-sea/>.

62 Yeo, “Threats along the Sulu Sea”.

63 Ibid.

## The Youth Bulge and Radicalisation

The Sulu-Celebes Sea is one of the major shipping routes of Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup> Annually, US\$40 billion worth of goods pass through the Sulu-Celebes Sea, creating great economic opportunities for inhabitants of the region in logistics management, ship maintenance, and other complementary sectors.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, its marine biodiversity<sup>66</sup> generates economic opportunities for eco-tourism<sup>67</sup>, fish farming, and reef-sourced biomedical products.<sup>68</sup>

However, the threats arising from crime, piracy and terrorism have significantly impacted investors' confidence in that region. Notwithstanding these opportunities, the labour force participation rate of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is only 62.3 percent for individuals who are above 15 years old, signalling a high unemployment figure despite the reported 3.8 percent unemployment rate.<sup>69</sup> More critically, low levels of formal education in the BARMM have led to limits on workforce development.<sup>70</sup>

Non-Governmental Organisations have identified coastal poverty<sup>71</sup> and relative economic depression<sup>72</sup> as the key factors that may induce grievances and lead to a sense of relative deprivation and injustice for which affected individuals feel the need to rebel against. This then drives individuals into engaging in illicit activities and political violence.<sup>73</sup>

While comprehensive data on the youth unemployment rates in the region is unavailable, the high intensity of conflict and low formal education attainment reduces economic opportunities among youth. Based on the youth bulge theory, spaces with high youth population and high youth unemployment are more prone to civil conflict.<sup>74</sup> The poor economic outlook, coupled with existing political grievances, facilitates the continuous recruitment of disgruntled youth into militancy.<sup>75</sup>

The coasts of the Sulu-Celebes Seas has observed high proportion of youth participating in Abu Sayyaf activities. This includes the infamous Ajang Ajang unit, which comprised sons of deceased Abu Sayyaf members. Much of the Abu Sayyaf militant strength is derived from its youth. Notable leaders like Isnilon Hapilon (49 years old when killed), leader of the Islamic State's East Asian Wilayah, participated in militancy since he was 17.<sup>76</sup> Amin Baco (35 years old when killed), who was touted to succeed Hapilon, participated in Islamist insurgencies since he was 16.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless,

64 Amling et al., "Stable Seas: Sulu-Celebes Seas", 10.

65 Ibid., 6.

66 Ibid., 56.

67 Fred Frederikse, 'Sulu: Pirates, Conflict and Eco-Tourism', *NZ Herald*, 19 October 2020, sec. Whanganui Chronicle, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/whanganui-chronicle/news/fred-frederikse-sulu-pirates-conflict-and-eco-tourism/65Q6QQ3XZLWIRD2IMNCZ4RO3FY/>.

68 Andrew W. Bruckner, 'Life-Saving Products from Coral Reefs', *Issues in Science and Technology* (blog), 1 January 1970, [https://issues.org/p\\_bruckner/](https://issues.org/p_bruckner/).

69 'BARMM Labour and Employment', Philippine Statistics Authority, July 2020, <http://rssoarmm.psa.gov.ph/statistics/labor-and-employment>.

70 'ARMM Total Population', Philippine Statistics Authority, 26 September 2017, <http://rssoarmm.psa.gov.ph/release/54732/special-release/armm-total-population-%28based-on-popcen-2015%29>.

71 Amling et al., 'Stable Seas: Sulu-Celebes Seas', 14.

72 'Why Do People Choose to Rebel?', *OEF Research* (blog), 10 January 2018, <https://www.oefresearch.org/think-peace/why-do-people-choose-rebel>.

73 Ibid.

74 Lionel Beehner, 'The Effects of "Youth Bulge" on Civil Conflicts', *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 13 April 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/background/effects-youth-bulge-civil-conflicts>.

75 Ibid.

76 Julie S. Alipala, 'FBI Called out on Fake Hapilon News', *Inquirer News*, 1 June 2017, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/901505/fbi-called-out-on-fake-hapilon-news>.

77 Jodesz Gavilan, 'New ISIS Emir? Get to Know Malaysian Terrorist Amin Baco', *Rappler*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/new-isis-emir-malaysian-amin-baco>.

more research onto this topic is required to investigate the relationship between the high youth recruitment and economic deprivation at the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has decimated the economies of the TCA member states. Youth unemployment for the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia has risen significantly as a result of measures to curtail the spread of the virus.<sup>78</sup> This trend worsens the existing socio-political grievances of the population, thereby increasing youth participation in regional militancy.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, governments must adopt both hard and soft power to build lasting peace in the region.

## Policy Recommendations

### Asset Transparency and Accountability

Despite agreements to jointly patrol the Sulu-Celebes Seas, the naval resources of TCA member states are stretched between their respective bilateral sovereign interests, and trans-border crime and terrorism in the Sulu-Celebes Sea. Competing geopolitical priorities may result in a disproportionate allocation of security assets in the Sulu-Celebes Sea, which is often viewed as a peripheral national concern.

While some member states have invested significantly to patrol the TBA, others have prioritised its national interests. TCA member states should thereby advocate for an equitable allocation of naval resources deployed to the Sulu-Celebes Sea. This can only be achieved if naval asset deployment at the Sulu-Celebes Seas is transparent for each member state to scrutinise. A regular asset deployment report would improve transparency and hold member states accountable to their commitment to patrol the Sulu-Celebes Sea.

By having a more transparent declaration of naval assets deployed to the Sulu-Celebes Seas, member states of the TCA would also be pressured to match the resources other states have devoted to securing the region. Additionally, public awareness of the naval and aerial assets can serve as a deterrent and may discourage maritime crime.

### Enhanced Patrols

Inter-governmental and inter-agency cooperation between the member states must be improved and sustained. TCA member states have taken promising initial steps by establishing the MCCs, which has improved intelligence exchange between them.<sup>80</sup> However, more routine joint maritime, air, and land patrols of the Sulu-Celebes Sea should be conducted. Maritime incidents in the region have indeed reduced since the patrols began.<sup>81</sup>

78 Ben O. de Vera, 'COVID-19 Seen Triggering Youth Employment Crisis', *Inquirer Business*, 19 August 2020, <https://business.inquirer.net/305564/covid-19-seen-triggering-youth-employment-crisis>; Luthifi T. Dzulfikar, 'How the COVID-19 Pandemic Will Leave More Young People Unemployed in Indonesia', *The Jakarta Post*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/07/05/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-leave-more-young-people-unemployed-in-indonesia.html>; Darryl Tan, 'Commentary: Malaysia's Youth Face Some of the Bleakest Economic Prospects', *CNA*, 19 July 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/malaysia-economy-youth-bleak-prospects-unemployment-jobs-12940548>.

79 Adam Burke, 'Peace and the Pandemic: The Impact of Covid-19 on Conflict in Asia', *The Asia Foundation* (blog), 15 April 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/2020/04/15/peace-and-the-pandemic-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-conflict-in-asia/>.

80 'Guidance on Abduction of Crew in the Sulu-Celebes Seas and Waters off Eastern Sabah', 7.

81 Zachary Abuza, 'The Maritime Security Challenge in Sabah', *The Maritime Executive*, 16 August 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-maritime-security-challenge-in-sabah>.



However, apart from occasionally conducting rendezvous operations near their respective borders, warships do not patrol the area together.<sup>82</sup> Joint air patrols also seem to be infrequent after the first exercise that was carried out in October 2017.<sup>83</sup> However, in 2019, the member states conducted the Indomalphi Middle Land Exercise; a joint land exercise between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to enhance border cooperation.<sup>84</sup> Exercises like this should be conducted routinely to reduce vulnerable windows of opportunity for maritime crime.

## Economic Development

Member states should investigate the potential of economic development of the coastal regions surrounding the Sulu-Celebes Sea. Coastal regions such as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in the Philippines<sup>85</sup>, Sulawesi<sup>86</sup> and North Maluku in Indonesia have suffered from rising economic inequality. Migrant communities in Sabah suffer from low wages and lack of access to essential services such as healthcare and education.<sup>87</sup> These have been exacerbated as a result of the economic downturn brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>88</sup>

Considering the fact that economic inequality and unemployment may lead to individuals becoming radicalised and engaging in political violence, governments must focus on the socio-economic development of these vulnerable regions. An example would be the KESBAN at Sea (*Keselamatan dan Pembangunan; Security and Development*) programme pursued by the Malaysian government in Sabah. Modelled after Malaysia's counter-insurgency strategy against the Communists, KESBAN at Sea is a holistic security model that encompasses economic and socio-political security aspects apart from traditional maritime and defence security.<sup>89</sup>

It is focused on interdicting support of coastal communities for criminal and militant groups by improving the communities' socio-economic and political welfare, thus shifting their interests towards the legitimate economy.<sup>90</sup> Its main aim is to eventually reduce kinetic measures and shift towards softer approaches to ensure broad-based security.<sup>91</sup> Similar projects can be replicated in economically deprived regions of the TBA. This would facilitate economic inclusiveness to disincentivise individuals, particularly the youth who seem to be the group at highest risk of radicalisation, from engaging in rebellion and political violence.

82 Storey, 'Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress', 6.

83 Sumisha Naidu, 'First Joint Air Patrols over Sulu Sea Launched by Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia', *Channel NewsAsia*, 12 October 2017, sec. Asia, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/first-joint-air-patrols-over-sulu-sea-launched-by-malaysia-9304708>; Prashanth Parameswaran, 'What's With the New Sulu Sea Trilateral Air Patrols?', *The Diplomat* (blog), 13 October 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/whats-with-the-new-sulu-sea-trilateral-air-patrols/>; Storey, 'Trilateral Security Cooperation in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: A Work in Progress', 3.

84 Prashanth Parameswaran, 'What's Behind the First Sulu Sea Trilateral Land Exercise?', *The Diplomat* (blog), 17 June 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/whats-behind-the-first-sulu-sea-trilateral-land-exercise/>.

85 Amling et al., 'Stable Seas: Sulu Celebes Seas', 9.

86 'Sulawesi Development Diagnostic I Achieving Shared Prosperity', *The World Bank*, June 2015, [http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/707811469181933626/pdf/107184-WP-SulawesiDevelopmentDiagnosticEnglish-PUBLIC.pdf#page=\[7\]](http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/707811469181933626/pdf/107184-WP-SulawesiDevelopmentDiagnosticEnglish-PUBLIC.pdf#page=[7]).

87 Jay Benson, 'The Forgotten Key to Maritime Security in the Sulu-Celebes Seas', *The Diplomat* (blog), 21 March 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-forgotten-key-to-maritime-security-in-the-sulu-celebes-seas/>.

88 Derrick A. Paulo and Ikhwan Rivai, 'Can the Poor in Malaysia Cope with the Challenges Posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic?', *CNA*, 18 October 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/poor-malaysia-cope-challenges-posed-covid-19-pandemic-poverty-13303070>.

89 Martin A. Sebastian, 'KESBAN at Sea - Holistic Security for East Sabah', *The Borneo Post*, 15 July 2018, <https://www.pressreader.com/malaysia/the-borneo-post/20180715/281934543720430>.

90 Ibid.

91 Amling et al., 'Stable Seas: Sulu-Celebes Seas', 17.

## Conclusion

The Sulu-Celebes Sea continues to be the centre of gravity for terrorism in Southeast Asia. The archipelagic terrain favours the insurgents as the ASG exploits geography to conduct KFR tactics and smuggle foreign fighters into Mindanao. While the authorities have agreed to patrol the Sulu-Celebes Sea via the TCA jointly, its effectiveness is limited by the naval assets deployed to the seas.

The naval assets deployed to support the TCA is further restrained by the maritime territorial disputes between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Additionally, all three member states of the TCA are also concerned with the Chinese claims of the South China Seas and had deployed their naval assets further north to resist its encroachment.

This paper proposed three key recommendations to address the multifaceted problems at the Sulu-Celebes Sea: enhanced patrols, asset transparency, and economic development. Through these initiatives, it is hoped that by expanding the scope of the TCA by ensuring accountability between member states and addressing the socio-economic issues of the region, the TBA can be rendered more resilient to terrorist encroachment, thereby improving regional security.

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