ADDRESSING CURRENT AND EVOLVING MARITIME SECURITY THREATS IN TRI-BORDER SOUTHEAST ASIA: FROM MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS TO CAPACITY BUILDING

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Presented at the international conference, “Maritime Security in Southeast Asia: Maritime Domain Awareness” co-organized by the Pacific Forum CSIS and the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) held at the Diamond Hotel, Manila, Philippines on 29-31 January 2012

In this presentation, I will briefly describe the current and evolving threats of piracy, terrorism and other organized crimes activities in the tri-border sea area of Southeast Asia. I will also describe the extent of our awareness of these threats and explain why capacity building is essential to address these current and evolving threats.

The tri-border sea area of Southeast Asia covering the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia has been described as a “danger zone” because of many illicit maritime activities in the form of smuggling and trafficking (arms, drugs, and people) as well as acts of terrorism, piracy and armed robberies against ships.1 Like the tri-border area of South America, the tri-border area of the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia is considered to be a “criminal haven”.2

Unfortunately, it is utterly difficult to get accurate data on these illicit maritime activities because some incidents are not detected or even reported. If incidents are detected, there is a perennial problem of under-reporting. Thus, there is a tendency for these three littoral states to rely on usual general estimates provided by organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for human trafficking and smuggling; the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for drug trafficking and smuggling; and, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) for trafficking and smuggling of small arms and light weapons.

My presentation, however, will only focus on piracy and terrorist threats.

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The tri-border Southeast Asia is making progress in the reporting of incidents pertaining to piracy and armed robbery against ships because of the Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) of International Maritime Bureau (IMB) based in Malaysia and the Information Sharing Centre (ISC) of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) based in Singapore. However, these two reporting centers have differences on reported figures because of their dissimilarities on the definitions of piracy. Nonetheless, these two reporting centers contribute substantially on maritime domain awareness of piracy situation in tri-border Southeast Asia.

Piracy remains a maritime security problem in Southeast Asia. Though the IMB recorded in 2011 a decrease of piracy attacks in the region compared in 2010, there is no reason to be complacent because many incidents were not really reported, particularly those incidents occurring in Sulu Sea and Celebes/Sulawesi Sea. In 2011, IMB reported a total of 72 piracy attacks in Southeast Asia, excluding Malacca Straits, which only recorded one piracy attack. Most of the reported attacks occurred in the anchorages of Indonesia.

Reported incidents of armed robberies against ships and vessels in Indonesia have seen a rise for the past two years. From 40 reported incidents in 2010, armed robberies against anchored vessels, tugs and barges in Indonesia increased to 46 in 2011. Pirates operated mostly in the waters of Anambas, Natuna, Mangkai, Merundung, Tanjung Priok, Jakarta and Dumai. Armed with guns, knives and machetes, pirates normally attack at night time and they are usually local, petty, and opportunistic individuals involved only in small-scale operations in the anchorages of Balikpapan, Belawan, Dumai, Muara Jawa, Samarinda, Surabayaam Taboneo, and Tanjung Priok, among others.

But the greater problem confronting the maritime security of tri-border Southeast Asia is terrorism. Though terrorist threats in the region are viewed to have been managed successfully by governments in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, because of national and regional counter-terrorism measures, these threats, however, have not been totally eliminated. Terrorist threats, in fact, have evolved. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), for example, has a splinter group called Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), which has plans to strike back and wreak havoc. JAT activities in Indonesia have increased in 2011.

But in my opinion, terrorist threats in tri-border Southeast Asia will come from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Based on the research conducted by our

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Our institute has learned that Isnilon Hapilon already died on December 20, 2011 due to cancer, which he got from an infected wound in his leg. He was buried in a secret grave in Maluso, Basilan. Nadzmir Allih, a young ASG commander reportedly educated at the University of the Philippines, is believed to have replaced Hapilon. Information reported by reliable PIPVTR source on the ground revealed that the Abu Sayyaf is continuously receiving financial assistance from donors based in Saudi Arabia.

I have already argued that piracy and maritime terrorism are inherent in the capability of ASG. Most ASG members and followers belong to Muslim families and communities of fishermen with a century-old seafaring tradition. Because ASG members live close to the waters of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, they have gained tremendous familiarity of the maritime environment. In fact, most Muslim Filipinos living in coastal communities are experienced divers. ASG members’ deep awareness and knowledge of the maritime domain also gives them ample capability to conduct piracy and wage maritime terrorist attacks.

Our institute has learned recently that the group of Jumdail Gumbahali is planning to launch a big kidnapping operation in the waters bordering the Philippines and Malaysia. Dubbed by the ASG as the “big plan”, this operation is similar to the 2000 Sipadan Hostage taking incident that targeted foreign nationals in the border of Malaysia.


The planned operation would be joined by Julkipli bin Hir (alias Marwan) and some JI members who are familiar with the area. JI followers have learned to use many routes to operate in the tri-border area. JI followers have, in fact, learned how to come and go around tri-border area unnoticed by law enforcement authorities. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has recently admitted that at least five JI terrorists are still in Mindanao being coddled by ASG. They are Amin Baco, Marwan, Mauiya, Saad and Qayyim.

Since September 11, 2011 (9/11), our “maritime domain awareness” of piracy and terrorist threats in tri-border Southeast Asia has improved. But there is still a great deal of effort to raise the national capacity of littoral states to confront these threats. The Philippines, particularly, still needs to enhance its national capacity to combat piracy and terrorism in its very huge maritime domain, even if achievements towards this end have been recorded in recent years.

Aside from national capacity building, littoral states of tri-border maritime Southeast Asia still need to improve regional information exchange, communication procedures, and coordinating mechanism to combat threats of piracy and terrorism. Border crossing agreements between the Philippines and Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, and Malaysia and Indonesia are essential bilateral efforts. The signing of Trilateral Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures on 7 May 2002 is also a good starting point. However, there is a need to take stock of the achievements of these bilateral and trilateral efforts and to identify areas for improvement, which is necessary to enhance coordination.

Addressing current and evolving maritime security threats in tri-border Southeast Asia needs more than maritime domain awareness. There must be concomitant efforts to build national and trilateral capacities to address these threats, particularly in generating actionable intelligence for information sharing among relevant national and regional players.

Building national and regional capacities to detect threats and to prevent threats from wreaking havoc is essential for the maritime domain awareness to really succeed.