



ISSUE BRIEF

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES ISLAMABAD

Web: www.issi.org.pk
Phone: +92-920-4423, 24
Fax: +92-920-4658

JOINT MILITARY COOPERATION BETWEEN INDONESIA, MALAYSIA AND PHILIPPINES

By
Majid Mahmood
Research Associate

Edited by
Najam Rafique

October 12, 2017

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Malaysian English daily *The Sunday Daily* reported on October 13, 2017 that Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines will begin coordinated air patrols off the strife-torn southern Philippines in November to combat the growing threat posed by Islamist militants.¹ The paper also quoted Malaysian defense ministry spokeswoman that "patrols were aimed at combating the threat from Daesh (IS), piracy and sea robberies".² The main focus of these joint air and naval patrols is the area of Sulu Sea.

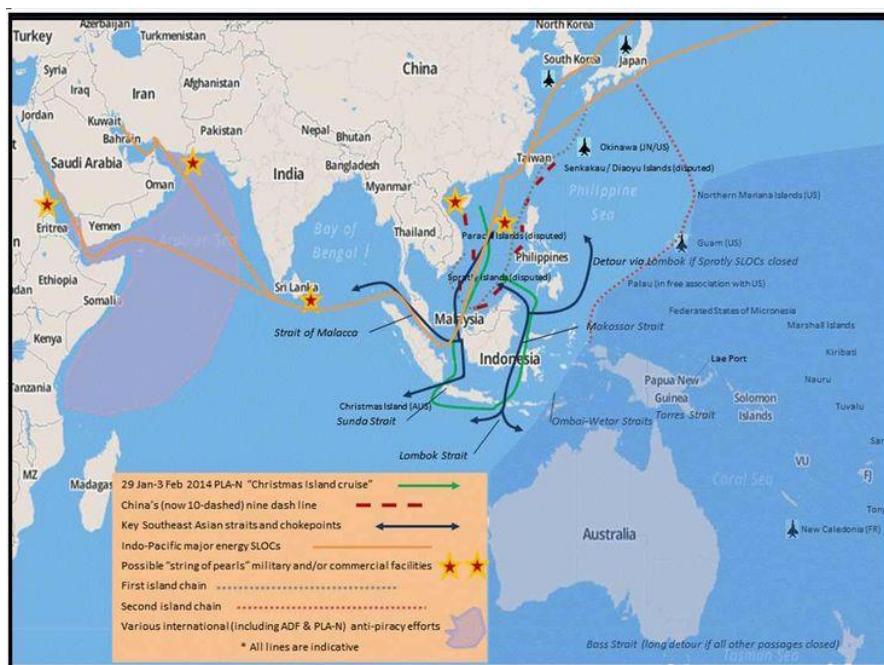
The Sulu Sea is located in the southwestern region of the Philippines, separated from the South China Sea in the northwest by Palawan and from the Celebes Sea in the southeast by the Sulu Archipelago. Borneo is found to the southwest and Visayas to the northeast. Sulu Sea contains a number of islands. The Cuyo Islands and Cagayan Sulu are part of the province of Palawan whereas Mapun and the Turtle Islands are part of the province of Tawi-Tawi.

The Sulu Sea is strategically located that intersects important sea lines of communication of South China Sea and inner South East Asia. These sea lines of communications are one of the busiest in the world because of the heavy maritime container traffic.

¹ "Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines to conduct air patrols." *The Sunday Daily*. <http://www.thesundaily.my/news/2017/10/13/malaysia-indonesia-philippines-conduct-air-patrols> (accessed November 08, 2017)

² Ibid

Following map illustrates Sea Lines of Communications in South East Asia:



The presence of an old piracy problem in the regional waters of South East Asia including the Sulu Sea, have recently resulted in increased cooperation and coordination amongst navies and maritime forces of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Philippines. Coordinated air patrols now seems to be the next logical step of the current momentum of security cooperation against piracy and local militant movements proclaiming their allegiances to ISIS in recent years.

This existing thrust started in 2015 when Philippine and Malaysia began holding joint naval exercises.³ In 2016, the trend continued with Indonesia also joining the coordinated sea patrols to fight maritime crime and terrorism in the piracy-prone Sulu Sea.⁴ In June 2017, Singapore offered to join these patrols in the Sulu Sea,⁵ while the Philippines also approached the US and China to conduct bilateral patrols in Sulu Sea.⁶ The US conducted joint patrols with Philippine Navy, while China is still studying the offer made by President Duterte.

³ Parameswaran, Prashanth. "Philippines, Malaysia Hold Joint Naval Exercises Amid Security Concerns." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/philippines-malaysia-hold-joint-naval-exercises-amid-security-concerns/> (accessed November 07, 2017)

⁴ Arshad, Arlina. "Jakarta, KL and Manila to start joint patrols in Sulu Sea." *Straits Times*. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jakarta-kl-and-manila-to-start-joint-patrols-in-sulu-sea> (accessed November 08, 2017)

⁵ Chan, Francis. "Joint Sulu Sea patrols launched; info-sharing from S'pore next." *Straits Times*. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/joint-sulu-sea-patrols-launched-info-sharing-from-spore-next> (accessed November 09, 2017)

⁶ Romero, Alexis. "Rody open to military exercises with China in Sulu Sea." *The Philippine Star*. <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/05/02/1695911/rody-open-military-exercises-china-sulu-sea> (accessed November 09, 2017)

As noted above, these maritime activities in the area of Sulu Sea has been preceded by rise of pirate attacks and militant activities associated with Abu Sayaf group based in Southern Philippine. According to annual statistics compiled by UK-based International Chamber of Commerce's Maritime Bureau, piracy and armed robbery attacks against ships in the area have witnessed a general increase with varying intensity.⁷

ICC IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships – 2016 Annual Report

TABLE 1: Locations of ACTUAL and ATTEMPTED attacks, January – December: 2012 – 2016

Location	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
SE ASIA					
Indonesia	81	106	100	108	49
Malacca Straits	2	1	1	5	
Malaysia	12	9	24	13	7
Philippines	3	3	6	11	10
Singapore Straits	6	9	8	9	2
Thailand			2	1	

Source: Report of International Chamber of Commerce's Maritime Bureau, Piracy and Armed Robbery Attacks against Ships – 2016 Annual Report.

The increasing trends for the Philippines are also visible in the report for the year 2017 compiled till March.⁸

ICC- IMB Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Report – First Quarter 2017

TABLE 1: Locations of ACTUAL and ATTEMPTED attacks January - March 2013 – 2017

Locations	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
SE ASIA					
Indonesia	25	18	21	4	7
Malacca Straits			1		
Malaysia			3		1
Philippines	1		2	2	9
Singapore Straits	2	5	2		1
Thailand			1		

Source: Report of International Chamber of Commerce's Maritime Bureau, Piracy and Armed Robbery Attacks against Ships – First Quarter 2017.

⁷ Report of International Chamber of Commerce's Maritime Bureau, Piracy and Armed Robbery Attacks against Ships, 01 January – 31 December 2016. <http://www.nepia.com/media/558888/2016-Annual-IMB-Piracy-Report.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2017)

⁸ Report of International Chamber of Commerce's Maritime Bureau, Piracy and Armed Robbery Attacks against Ships, January – March 2013-2017. <http://www.allaboutshipping.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-Q1-IMB-Piracy-Report-ABRIDGED.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2017)

The regional countries are also worried about the increasing activities of ISIS inspired militant groups. They are mostly decades old pockets of insurgencies which would like to gather media attention by claiming to give allegiance to ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Apart from these trends, the region is also gripped with strong undertones of geopolitics where US has increased its naval activities as part of its overall “Rebalance to Asia-Pacific” strategy aimed at China. Joint air and naval patrols by regional countries in the strategic Sulu Sea could serve as a model for further collaboration aimed at strengthening their naval posture near the southern area of South China Sea.

Threats of piracy and militancy by non-state groups provide a reasonable pretext to expand the existing joint military collaboration in the form of air and naval patrols to include limiting China's ability to maneuver in the region.

It is too early to suggest whether there can be a US-led counter piracy task force modeled along the lines of CTF 150 and CTF 151 present in the Horn of Africa near Somalia. But it is clear that regional maritime and naval cooperation will only increase despite the territorial disputes and differences amongst the states involved.