

The Philippines' sanctuaries of terror

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The presence of insurgent or terrorist sanctuaries in nonbelligerent countries is one of the most intractable, explosive issues in international relations. It was a central fact of the Vietnam War, brought about the destruction of Lebanon, and continues to plague the coalition in Iraq. It is also key to the present war on terror in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam differed from Korea and Malaya, where containment and counterinsurgency prevailed, because the communists could outflank allied forces in South Vietnam by using "neutral" territory in Cambodia and Laos. Like the PLO presence in Lebanon until 1982, this strategy plunged hapless host countries into civil war and provoked invasions by stronger powers, in turn spurring more extremist movements - the Khmer Rouge, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad.

Like previous host countries, the Philippines is a weak state, at peace with its neighbors and the West. But, since 1994, its lawless southern islands have replaced Afghanistan as the main training ground and refuge for Southeast Asian jihadists. Most are Indonesians belonging to Jemaah Islamiyah, Mujahidin Kompak, and other Darul Islam factions.

Graduates of Mindanao's terror camps, for example, now rival in number the older generation of Southeast Asian Afghan alumni that forged ties with al-Qaida. Veterans of the Mindanao camps took part in almost every JI-linked bombing since 2000, including the attack that killed hundreds in Bali in 2002. New cohorts will pose a danger for years to come.

The terrorist attacks on the United States of Sept. 11, 2001, galvanized American interest in the southern Philippines. Mere weeks after the planes hit, Pentagon planners negotiated a return of American troops to Mindanao for the first time since the colonial era. Indeed, Mindanao was the second front in the war on terror until Iraq came to dominate U.S. threat perceptions. Australian Premier John Howard has likewise openly mulled pre-emptive military strikes on terrorist sanctuaries in the region. Mindanao is not Cambodia or Lebanon, but the essential dilemma is the same. How does one separate the terrorist parasite from its unwilling host, without doing fatal violence to the patient?

In the Philippines, the diagnosis is complicated by the fact that terrorists are embedded in a volatile Muslim insurgency with which the West has no quarrel. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front is Southeast Asia's strongest separatist group. It enjoys popular support, expresses legitimate grievances, and peace talks are underway. Like the Palestinians, however, the MILF is riven by factions, and its leaders cannot, or will not, exclude terrorists from areas that they control.

In part, this reflects political hedging by the MILF in the face of Manila's incapacity to make meaningful concessions. President Gloria Arroyo's government is on the ropes, with a state of emergency declared in February, following an abortive coup attempt and months of instability arising from allegations of fraud in the 2004 elections. The allegations involve the armed forces' manipulation of the Mindanao vote - underscoring how state failure in the south, a politicized military, and paralysis in the capital reinforce each other in a downward spiral.

State failure in the southern Philippines now places the entire region at risk. After a rough passage to democracy, a traditionally strong Indonesian state is reasserting itself, forcing jihadists out, and across Mindanao's porous frontiers. Despite concerns over conflict in

southern Thailand, there are no secessionist enclaves beyond government control, and no indications of foreign terrorist involvement.

Only in the Philippines do state failure, chronic insurgency, and proliferating ties between local and foreign terrorists come together in a lethal cocktail. Combined with a restive military and an impotent administration, the country has become Southeast Asia's weakest link in the war on terror.

So what is to be done? American forces are probing the sanctuaries in the guise of training exercises, and they are backing targeted air strikes. But they must tread lightly, lest they be drawn into a shooting war, which would catalyze new alliances among local and foreign militants. A conventional military approach failed in Cambodia and Lebanon. It would fail in Mindanao, too.

Instead, surgical military strikes based on an expanded intelligence effort should complement the peace process, prying extremists away from the MILF mainstream. A crucial, if embryonic, mechanism in this campaign is the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group, established by the Philippine government and MILF negotiators to facilitate cooperation against "lawless elements" in MILF territory. The Group's mandate should be widened, and resources should be provided to allow it to tackle terrorism explicitly.

In return for MILF cooperation, the United States, Australia, and other interested countries must pick up political slack and build the government's capacity to deliver a sustainable peace agreement for Mindanao. Prompt, substantial infusions of post-conflict aid will be indispensable ingredients for peace.

But so will security reforms. The Filipino armed forces must be better equipped to close down any remaining terrorist sanctuaries - and keep them closed. However, this will remain a futile mission until the armed forces are professionalized and depoliticized through reorientation to external defense, border security, and special operations. Only then will they lose their vested interest in an insurgency that has no end.

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