

**Statement before the  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

**“Black Flags over Mindanao:  
Terrorism in Southeast Asia”**

Testimony

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Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia and American foreign policy in the region to address this threat.

My remarks today will focus primarily on the security threats facing the Republic of the Philippines, the U.S. treaty ally in Asia that is most affected by the growing terrorist threat throughout Southeast Asia, and on how the United States can strengthen its security cooperation with the Philippines to address this threat.

### **The Importance of Southeast Asia & The U.S.-Philippines Alliance**

Mr. Chairman, I know that in previous hearings the Subcommittee has discussed the importance of Southeast Asia to the United States in both economic and security terms. The strategic importance of Southeast Asia to the United States is longstanding, and the U.S. continues to strengthen its defense cooperation with countries across the region in recognition of its continued and growing importance. We have treaty alliances with both Thailand and the Philippines, and robust and growing security relationships – including training, military exchanges, and defense-related trade – with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and increasingly Vietnam.

The Philippines is particularly important to American national security and foreign policy in Asia. The country is a former U.S. colony with deep historical and cultural ties to the United States, the world's twelfth-largest country by population, a lively democracy, and the region's fastest-growing economy with a robust trade and investment relationship with the United States. Since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951, the Philippines has been one of the United States' two treaty allies in Southeast Asia, and one of our most important security-partners in the Asia-Pacific.

In thinking about how to craft today's security cooperation with the Philippines to best address the changing counter-terrorism needs that we observe in the region, I wish to emphasize two main points.

First, the Philippines has a complicated and challenging security environment with which to contend, much of which is internal. The country is a 7,000-island archipelago, much of it low-lying, which renders it especially vulnerable to natural disasters such as typhoons and which places significant demand on the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to conduct Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations. Throughout the Philippines' history, it has also dealt with internal challenges related to crime, militancy, piracy, and terrorism – including the world's longest-running communist insurgency by the New People's Army (NPA) as well as a decades-long Muslim separatist movement in Mindanao. The high salience of internal security challenges makes the Philippines unusual among American treaty allies and partners in Asia.

As a result of this security environment, the Philippine government and armed forces place a relatively heavy emphasis on internal security issues and capabilities. This has been true throughout the Philippines' history; during the Cold War, the United States guaranteed the

Philippines' external security via the Mutual Defense Treaty, and the AFP focused primarily on internal security tasks. Under the previous President, Benigno Aquino III, the Philippines had begun to shift its focus more toward external defense, embarking on a defense modernization program that, among other things, started the process of moving the land-heavy AFP toward a force structure that emphasized air and maritime capabilities. Aquino also pursued international arbitration to challenge Chinese actions in the South China Sea and increased cooperation with the United States and other security partners, such as Japan and Australia, in pursuit of stronger external and maritime capabilities. Duterte has, to varying degrees, pulled back (or threatened to do so) from all of these initiatives – questioning the value of the US alliance and the more recent EDCA agreement, courting Chinese investment and infrastructure assistance, and declining to press Beijing on its actions in the South China Sea after the arbitration court ruled primarily in Manila's favor last year. Duterte's focus on internal security, therefore, is a return to the more internal focus that the AFP and Philippine government have traditionally held since 1945. I'll return to that issue in the section below.

The second point to emphasize relates to domestic politics in the Philippines, and their effect on specific forms of security cooperation. The Philippines is, consistently, by any survey you look at, one of the most pro-American places on earth. There are strong people-to-people ties between the U.S. and the Philippines and there is broad and stable goodwill toward the United States. At the same time, it is useful to remember that some of Duterte's statements echo – albeit using more colorful and inflammatory language – a long tradition of concern on the part of the Philippine left regarding potential U.S. encroachment on Philippine sovereignty. These concerns contributed to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from bases in the Philippines in the early 1990s, and the subsequent Philippine constitution explicitly forbade the establishment of permanent foreign military bases on the country's territory. American forces have, as a result, rotated through the Philippines under a Visiting Forces Agreement signed in 1999 and expanded (in terms of the number of bases hosting US troops) by the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), now including Lumbia Airfield in Cayan de Oro in Mindanao. U.S. security cooperation has generally been most successful when it acknowledges this reality in Philippine domestic politics.

### **The Changing Security Landscape**

During the past two decades, US security cooperation with the Philippines has focused primarily on either maritime security or counter-terrorism. From 2002 to 2015, the United States deployed several hundred special operations personnel to the southern Philippines for counter-terrorism purposes. The primary focal point of that cooperation, the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTFP), was discontinued in early 2015 after US involvement in a controversial operation, though the U.S. has, at the request of the Philippine government and military, provided intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and other technical assistance during the recent operations in Marawi.

As tensions have risen in the South China Sea, much of U.S. security cooperation in recent years has focused on maritime security, in keeping with the growing emphasis of the AFP on these missions. As part of this, the U.S. has refocused or added programs aimed at building the Philippines' naval and coast guard capabilities, as well as strengthening the country's maritime domain awareness. The United States has also regularly sent ships and personnel to the region

for humanitarian missions, such its assistance after Typhoon Yolanda struck the Philippines in November 2013, and the U.S. military's ongoing participation in Pacific Angel to deliver humanitarian assistance and training.

Over the course of the past year or so, however, concerns about terrorist activity in Mindanao have increased. These concerns have focused on a number of "black flag" militant groups based in the southern Philippines who both have sworn loyalty to Islamic State (IS or ISIS) and received recognition from them, and on the potential threat posed by IS-affiliated fighters returning to the region from fighting in the Middle East. In late November 2016, one of these IS-linked groups, the Maute group, occupied Butig in Lanao del Sur for five days. Fighting continues in Marawi, where IS-aligned fighters – principally from the Maute group, Abu Sayyaf, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters – appear to have coordinated to hold parts of the city in an urban siege that has now lasted almost two months. At the time of writing this testimony, Mindanao has been under martial law for around 50 days, an estimated 90 military and law enforcement personnel, around 40 civilians, and 380 militants have been killed in the fighting, around a quarter-million civilians have been displaced, and significant parts of the city have been destroyed. The Maute group was suspected of having placed a bomb near the U.S. embassy in Manila last November and of having bombed President Duterte's hometown of Davao as well. The appearance of foreign fighters in Marawi – not just Malaysians and Indonesians, but reportedly also Saudi, Yemeni, and Chechen fighters – raise the real possibility that Mindanao will become a central attraction for jihadists unable to travel to the Middle East or attracted to the operational, physical foothold being established in Mindanao. The collapse of a 2014 peace agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has exacerbated this territorial and political challenge, as militants disillusioned with the peace process turn to more radical IS-linked organizations instead.

At the same time, concerns about the number of abductions – kidnapping-for-ransom operations – carried out by militant groups in the waters around the southern Philippines have also heightened. Western hostages whose family or home governments did not meet ransom demands by the deadline have been executed, while the payments made for other hostages raise concern that these operations have been effective at raising funds for IS-linked militants. The Philippine press reported last fall that Abu Sayyaf, which has pledged allegiance to ISIS, had raised at least \$7 million in 2016 from its kidnapping operations. As a result of these maritime security concerns, and concerns about the safety of trade between the two countries, Indonesia temporarily suspended shipping and banned coal exports to the Philippines (70% of the country's supply). These kidnap-for-ransom operations therefore, are not only a maritime security and a law enforcement issue, but carry importance for counter-terrorism and trade throughout the region as well.

In short, the resurgence of Abu Sayyaf and the emergence of links – rhetorical and otherwise – between militant groups in Mindanao and Islamic State, especially in the context of the collapse of the peace agreement, lead to a significant increase in the counter-terrorism threat in the southern Philippines, and pose risks to the trade that passes through the Sulu Sea. The subcommittee's examination of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia and especially toward the Philippines, therefore, is timely.

## **Recommendations for Successful Security Cooperation**

There are compelling national security reasons for the United States to remain active and engaged in Southeast Asia, including in the Philippines. I'll focus here on seven recommendations where I believe Congress can play a significant role in advancing that cooperation, particularly as it relates to the region's shifting security landscape and growing counter-terrorism challenges.

First, Congress can play a real, strong, and positive role in addressing the terrorist threat and strengthening American national security partnerships in Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines. Concern in Washington about Duterte is understandable, but the Philippines remains a strongly pro-American place, and the Philippine government – both civilian and military – continue to consistently recognize the productive partnership that exists between our two countries. Additional Congressional engagement, including but not limited to visits to the region, could send an important signal. It is also important that this engagement extend beyond Malacanang to the various departments, the military, the legislature, local governments and leaders, and especially Philippine society. Strong leadership by Congress to signal U.S. presence, participation in, and commitment to the region can have a significant impact at the present time.

Second, Congress can build on the administration's engagement with ASEAN more broadly to show that U.S. support for the alliance with the Philippines is strong and bipartisan. President Trump's phonecalls to regional leaders and scheduled travel to the region, Vice President Pence's visit to Indonesia, Secretary Tillerson's meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers, and Secretary Mattis' participation in the Shangri-La dialogue have all signaled the importance of the region and begun to lay out an initial security vision of the U.S. role in a peaceful, prosperous, and free Asia. I commend this sub-committee's attention to ASEAN and to American policy in Asia thus far, and hope that Congress will continue to deepen and intensify its engagement in this strategically and economically vital region.

Third, the United States can continue, and consider expanding, its current maritime assistance to the Philippines. Executed well, maritime security assistance has the potential to simultaneously improve the Philippine government and military's ability to deal with multiple priorities: conducting HADR operations, improving law enforcement and counterterrorism capabilities, and boosting external defense toward to AFP's previously-stated goal of a "minimum credible deterrent." It is important that, even as the Philippines deals with an intensifying internal security and terrorist threat, it does not completely abandon efforts to strengthen its maritime capacities and defenses on the South China Sea.

Congress played an important role in establishing the Maritime Security Initiative for Southeast Asia, which aims at strengthening maritime domain awareness (MDA) and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and establishing a common operating picture among the United States and the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The Philippines was set to receive \$40 million in 2016 as part of a total of \$425 million spent on the Initiative between 2016 and 2020; it may make sense given changing conditions to re-allocate increased funding toward the Philippines in order to focus capacity-building where it is most urgently needed.

Maritime capacity-building also has the advantage of focusing on cooperation that doesn't raise concerns under the Leahy Amendment, and allows Congress to continue having a strong voice

on shared values such as human rights. This will help strike the right balance between recognizing the popular support that Duterte has had thus far, and strongly affirming the shared values upon which today's alliance is based. Continuing to regularly send humanitarian missions, as the U.S. has been doing, will be helpful for reinforcing these shared values domestically in the Philippines as well, as part of the broader engagement recommended above.

Fourth, if the Philippines requests it, the U.S. should be willing to examine its options for re-activating formal counter-terrorism cooperation initiatives with the Philippines, such as the previous Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines based in Camp Navarro in Zamboanga. The advantage of doing so is that, with the U.S. military currently providing technical assistance to the AFP, clearly defining the parameters of U.S. military involvement in the southern Philippines – insofar as this is possible given security considerations, of course – and proactively affirming that this presence will be consistent with the Philippine constitution may help to avoid domestic sensitivities. It is not necessary or desirable for U.S. counter-terrorism assistance to become a political football in Philippine domestic politics. Careful communication will help keep the focus on the important shared interest that our two countries have: preventing IS from establishing a physical foothold inside the territory of a U.S. treaty ally in Asia.

Fifth, the United States can support the Philippines' efforts to cooperate with other U.S. security partners throughout East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The launch of trilateral patrols and information-sharing among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in late June were an important step forward in boosting regional cooperation on counterterrorism and counter-piracy efforts. A common or shared "watch list" used by immigration and border control authorities across the three countries could additionally facilitate this cooperation. Strengthening the Philippines' naval, coast guard, and maritime law enforcement capability in the ways described above is also important to making this cooperation have teeth, and partners such as Japan, Australia, and South Korea have an important role to play in that capacity-building, augmenting and heightening the impact of American efforts.

Sixth, the U.S. can identify productive forms of economic engagement with the Philippines and Southeast Asia. This includes not just focused trade agreements on travel goods, but efforts to strengthen financial tools for combatting terrorism in the region. Like maritime capacity-building, these efforts can be geared to achieve multiple priorities at once – such as strengthening regional financial architecture to counteract North Korea's money laundering and revenue-generating activities in the region. It will be especially important to proactively limit the flow of funds from IS agents in the Middle East into Southeast Asia, in order to limit the growth and operational capabilities of IS-affiliated groups in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Seventh, the U.S. must be thoughtful about, and should monitor closely, the political context in which IS-linked terrorism might unnecessarily be able to gain greater traction. There is little question that the collapse of the 2014 peace agreement between the government and the MILF, and the resultant failure to create the Bangsamoro region in Mindanao, have contributed to the splintering of individuals and factions away from the MILF and toward more radical groups. Regionally, the treatment of the Rohingya Muslim population in Burma has also been identified as a grievance that could become a unifying cause, recruitment tool, and rallying cry for Islamic militants across Southeast Asia. The U.S. should therefore closely monitor the progress of these two issues, and express support for the development of effective, inclusive long-term solutions to two of the region's longest-standing points of tension.