

# SPECIAL REPORT

A S P I

## National security in the Philippines under Duterte:

Shooting from the hip or pragmatic partnerships beyond the noise?



Dr Peter Chalk

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AUSTRALIAN  
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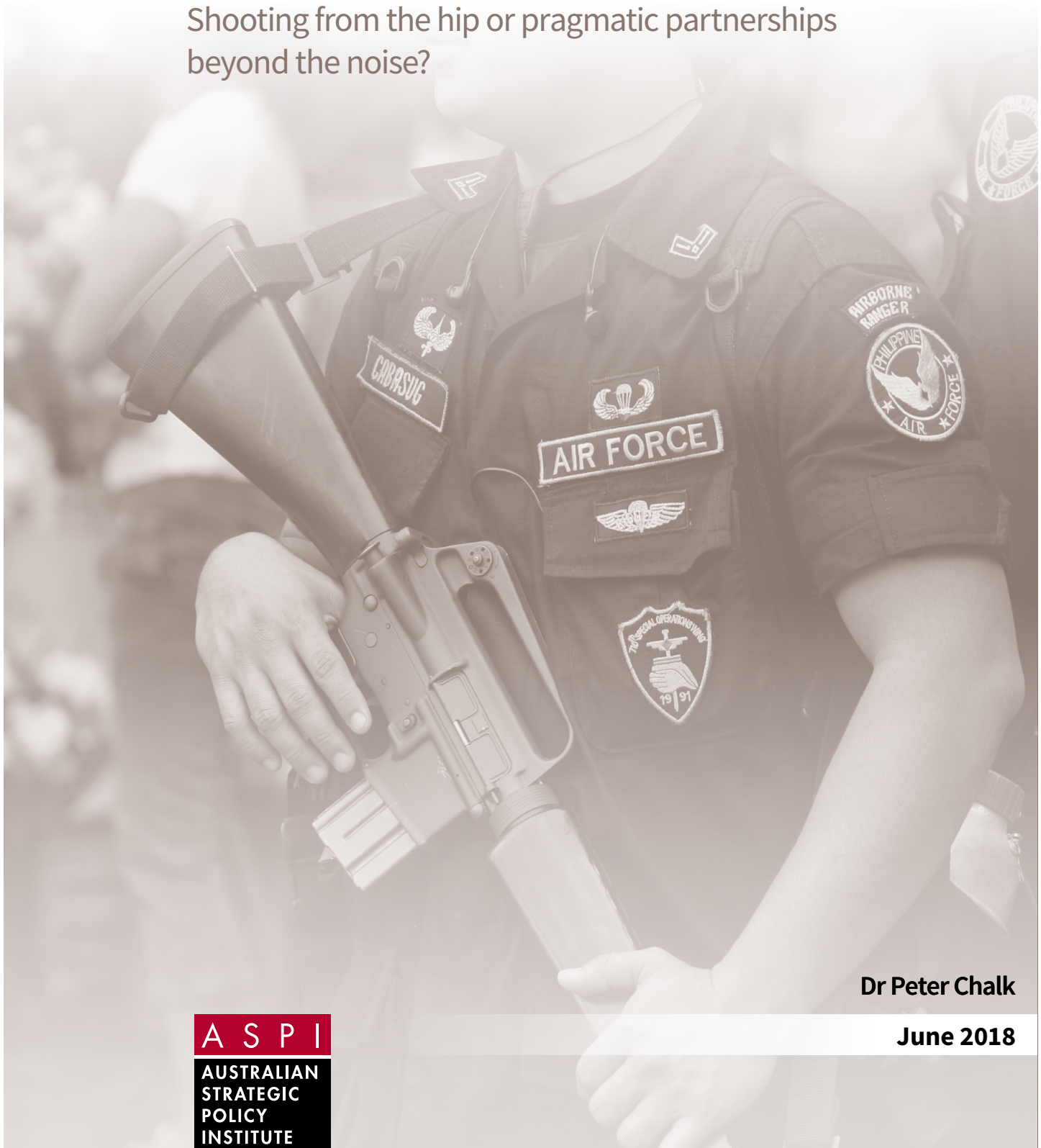
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**Cover image:** Security at a religious demonstration in Manila. Photo: Peter Treanor/Alamy Live News.



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# INTRODUCTION

In May 2016, Rodrigo Duterte, the long-term mayor of Davao City, won a resounding victory in the Philippines national presidential election, becoming the country's first elected leader from the conflict-ravaged province of Mindanao. He has since set in train a highly populist agenda that has seen internal security and stability as the main priority of his tenure.<sup>1</sup> Central to that focus has been countering terrorism, ending longstanding armed insurgencies and addressing violent crime at home, while pursuing a flexible policy overseas that's aimed at giving him sufficient time and space to deal with pressing domestic concerns.

Internally, the emphasis has been on:

- destroying the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which is an affiliate of the Islamic State
- negotiating an end to the protracted nationwide insurgency of the Communist Party of the Philippines – New People's Army (CPP-NPA)
- mitigating armed maritime crime (AMC) in the tri-border area (TBA) of the Sulu and Celebes seas
- eradicating the drug trade.

Regionally, Duterte has concentrated on:

- constructively engaging the People's Republic of China (PRC) to resolve—or at least dampen—territorial tensions in the South China Sea (SCS)
- pragmatically expanding the Philippines' relations with major powers, such as the PRC and Russia
- reducing the Philippines' traditional dependence on the US, although remaining highly cognisant of Washington's critical role as a regional security guarantor.

This Special Report examines the manner in which Duterte has gone about securing his internal objectives and assesses the effectiveness of those various approaches. It also looks at how he has sought to promote the Philippines as a 'strategic partner nation of the international community'<sup>2</sup> to diversify and rebalance the country's external alignments. The analysis concludes by looking at how Australia can best support Manila in bolstering its domestic stability and regional presence.

# DOMESTIC SECURITY PRIORITIES

Several key domestic security priorities have dominated the Duterte presidency since he assumed power on 30 June 2016. In order of importance, these focus areas can be listed as defeating Islamist terrorism in Mindanao, ending the protracted communist insurgency of the CPP-NPA and dealing with maritime piracy and drug-related crime.

## Defeating Islamist terrorism in Mindanao

Islamist-inspired terrorism and violent extremism have been an endemic feature of Mindanao and its surrounding islands since at least 1984, when the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—a breakaway faction of the more secularly oriented National Liberation Front (MNLFF)<sup>3</sup>—launched a campaign for an independent Muslim state in the southern Philippines.<sup>4</sup> The group has been engaged in on-off peace negotiations with Manila for over a decade and in 2014 signed an agreement that provides for a significant devolution of powers from the central government to form a truly autonomous region to be known as the Bangsamoro Judicial Entity (BJE). Although the legal instrument for enacting the accord—the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL)—was never ratified by the Philippines Congress due to its questionable constitutional validity, the MILF has continued to abide by a general ceasefire and remains largely committed to a non-violent resolution to the conflict in Mindanao.<sup>5</sup>

Today the main threat stems from the ASG, a self-proclaimed jihadist entity that was founded in 1991 by Abdurajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Afghan *mujahidin* campaign that was waged against the Soviet Union during the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> From its inception, the ASG closely aligned its local struggle to create a caliphate in Mindanao with the regional and global supremacy of Islam, mostly rhetorically and but also on occasion substantively.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its enduring emphasis on religious goals, the ASG has undergone several changes in identity, fluctuating between a disciplined, unified and ruthless militant movement and an unstructured, fluid mosaic of roving criminal bands. The group's current bifurcated configuration reflects this schizophrenic character. One faction is loyal to the imperatives of the late Isnilon Hapilon, a well-respected cleric who had pledged loyalty to Islamic State on at least two occasions, endorsed the abduction and execution of several Western hostages and been directly implicated in indiscriminate bombings and large-scale assaults, such as the 2017 siege of the southern Philippines city of Marawi (where he was killed). A second faction is a loosely organised cadre that follows the dictates of Radulan Sahiron, an elderly Muslim who isn't particularly devout in his theological beliefs, rejects working with outside extremists (arguing that doing so merely serves to attract US air strikes) and is more concerned with making money through kidnap-for-ransom schemes than furthering Islamist strategic designs.<sup>8</sup>

While Duterte has certainly pledged to rout Sahiron and his adherents as part of his overall push against crime, particularly in relation to abductions and hijackings in the Sulu and Celebes seas (see below), his main emphasis in terms of Islamist-inspired terrorism has been on destroying the more jihadist-oriented elements of the ASG. On assuming the presidency, Duterte ordered the army to prioritise the neutralisation of Hapilon loyalists within a year, reiterating that mandate in the wake of the protracted 2017 Marawi crisis that dragged on for five months and ultimately led to the deaths of more than 1,200 people.<sup>9</sup> To that end, he has flooded the south with thousands of troops, requested the deployment of an additional 20,000 soldiers to safeguard areas where there are continuing threats and declared an extended state of martial law across Mindanao to ensure the total eradication of militancy in the province.<sup>10</sup>

Duterte has accompanied his hardline counterterrorism stance with drives of a less forceful nature. One central plank in this endeavour has been to push the peace process in Mindanao, which, if successful, would significantly isolate the ASG and provide the government with an additional partner, namely the MILF, to pressure the group.<sup>11</sup> On assuming power, Duterte vocally supported the passage of the BBL, which the previous administration failed to ratify causing the derailment of the 2014 agreement on a BJE. However, he also made it clear that this should just be viewed as a stepping stone towards a final settlement, which he argues can only come about through the introduction of a full federal system that better represents the needs and aspirations of the Moro Muslim population in the south. This will require a revision of the country's 1987 Constitution, which will need to be approved through a plebiscite that his administration aims to hold before the end of 2022.<sup>12</sup>

How then should Duterte's approach to countering the more religiously motivated elements of the ASG be judged? If pronouncements from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are to be believed, the campaign has been relatively successful. According to General Carlito Glavez Jr, the head of the AFP's Western Mindanao Command, military offensives since 2016 have resulted in the neutralisation of more than 350 militants and the effective degradation of their ability to operate out of traditional stronghold bases in Basilan, Jolo, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. He has also gone on to assert that a full victory over the ASG by the beginning of 2019 is not only possible but is also 'very doable'.<sup>13</sup>

That said, forecasts of the movement's imminent demise have been made before, only to prove highly premature. Moreover, it isn't clear whether General Glavez's figure of 350 refers only to loyalists of the late Hapilon or also includes followers of Sahiron (who, as noted above, are motivated more by economic gain than extremist religious imperatives). Finally, it's questionable whether merely sending in more soldiers will have any decisive effect in turning the tide of what remains an unconventional war. The ASG has existed as a rump force of a few hundred fighters for well over a decade, repeatedly managing to survive concerted military onslaughts in a conflict environment that's clearly more conducive to the operations of small, highly mobile combat units.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of Duterte's approach to dealing with Islamist militancy in the southern Philippines may well depend on the outcome of the Moro peace process. A full and final settlement with the MILF would be a game-changer, allowing Manila to work with a credible Muslim cohort that has strong local support to progressively narrow the space in which ASG *jihadis* can move, blend and hide. Unfortunately, while the MILF welcomed Duterte's election victory on account of his Mindanao roots—and resoundingly backed his call for the ratification of the BBL—the favoured solution of federalism has left the movement confused and frustrated. As a piece in the online academic journal *Conversation* observes:

[W]hile Duterte vowed to pass the BBL during his presidential campaign, his views now seem to have moved instead towards implementing a federal state, which would inevitably see the MILF having to compete for power with others in the region, rather than becoming de facto rulers of their areas as under the BBL.<sup>14</sup>

## Ending the CPP-NPA insurgency

The NPA emerged as the armed wing of the CPP in 1968. The group's stated aim is to replace the current Filipino political and economic order with a socialist system through a strategy of protracted people's war. To achieve that objective, the movement has leveraged all tactical means at its disposal, including military action, mass mobilisation and political lobbying. At the height of its strength, the CPP-NPA could count on 20,000 members organised into guerrilla fronts that spanned the breadth of the country.<sup>15</sup>

During the Benigno Aquino administration (2010–2016), the government pursued a dual-track policy against the CPP-NPA that consisted of five coercive offensives and three soft incentive programs. The goal was to achieve a strategic victory over the communist movement—defined as a three-quarters reduction on its strength, capability and influence based on 2007 figures. Although that did not occur in strict numerical terms, by the time Aquino left office the CPP-NPA was weaker than at any time in the past, its strength reduced to a mere 4,500 cadres and its operational presence slashed to just 5% of the nation's 42,029 *barangays* (the smallest local government units).<sup>16</sup>



On assuming the presidency, Duterte sought to capitalise on the CPP-NPA's disarray, his self-defined socialist persona and the ties he made with the left when he was Mayor of Davao City to bring an end to one of the world's longest running insurgencies. His approach was conciliatory, and he quickly announced a unilateral AFP ceasefire (which was reciprocated by the communists), promised to release political prisoners and confirmed that he was open to granting a general amnesty for CPP-NPA cadres, including their senior leaders. Four rounds of talks ensued, focusing on a range of issues from land redistribution, socio-economic changes and political reforms to the composition of a joint monitoring committee that would oversee the implementation of any end-of-hostilities accord that was reached.<sup>17</sup>

Despite that promising start, little further progress has been made towards a final deal, and trust between the two sides is appearing to evaporate by the day. Duterte has consistently refused a CPP-NPA demand to free 400 communist inmates from jail, arguing that he had never agreed to a figure of that size in the first place and going on to assert that the AFP would never accept such a large commutation in any case. The CPP-NPA has, in turn, denounced Manila for sabotaging the peace process by reneging on earlier commitments, using that as justification for revoking its unilateral ceasefire in February 2017.<sup>18</sup> Repeated violent clashes have since broken out between rebel forces and the military, the scale and intensity of which markedly escalated following the declaration of martial law in the wake of the Marawi crisis—a move the communists interpreted as much directed against them as against Islamist extremists.<sup>19</sup>

In November 2017, Duterte signed Proclamation No. 360, formally terminating all talks with the CPP-NPA.<sup>20</sup> At the time this was viewed as an ominous development, possibly presaging the wholesale abandonment of the peace process. Indeed that's exactly what Joseph Estrada did in 1999 before declaring an all out war to destroy the communist movement.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately this does not appear to be the case with Duterte directing his cabinet to resume talks with the NPA in April 2018.<sup>22</sup> How this will play out in terms of a final settlement with the CPP-NPA remains to be seen.

## Countering AMC and piracy in the tri-border area of the Sulu and Celebes seas

The TBA between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia in the Sulu and Celebes seas encompasses a maritime space of approximately 1 million square kilometres. According to a 2016 estimate from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the area sees roughly 100,000 ship transits a year, transporting over 55 million tonnes of cargo worth more than US\$40 billion (A\$52 billion) and 18 million passengers.<sup>23</sup>

Although the TBA is an important trade and navigation corridor, it has long acted as a hub for transnational crime and conflict due to corruption, poor governance, poverty, porous and contested maritime borders, weak coastal surveillance and an absence of adequate patrol platforms. Gun running, human and drug trafficking, piracy, AMC and seaborne terrorism have all affected the region, as have lingering interstate disputes such as those over Sabah (between Malaysia and the Philippines) and the Ambalat Block (between Indonesia and Malaysia).<sup>24</sup>

The complexity of the threat environment in the TBA worsened in March 2016—two months before Duterte's presidential victory—with a surge of high-profile hijackings. The assaults initially focused on tugboats and fishing trawlers due to their low waterlines and sluggish speed, but the scale and audacity of attacks quickly escalated. Within weeks, heavier craft were being routinely targeted, including bulk carriers, product tankers, container vessels and general cargo ships.<sup>25</sup> Most strikes took the form of kidnap-for-ransom: by the end of 2017 the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre had recorded 59 crew abductions in 23 incidents.<sup>26</sup>

Although no party has explicitly taken responsibility for the hijackings, most commentators believe the main instigator was the Sahiron faction of the ASG, given its established presence in the region, long maritime heritage and historical tradition of carrying out high-profile criminal maritime operations. Certainly, Manila appears to be of

that opinion, reflected by Duterte's pledge soon after taking up office to decisively dent the group's activities in the TBA. To that end, he mobilised specialist units from the AFP to destroy ASG criminal strongholds in Sulu, made sea marshalls available for all domestic ships plying the waters between Zamaboanga, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, employed maritime law enforcement ships to monitor and prevent suspicious vessels from entering the area and deployed assets from the Philippine Coast Guard to provide an immediate response capability for intercepting suspected pirate vessels.<sup>27</sup>

Given the porosity of the TBA, Duterte also moved to actively collaborate with Indonesia and Malaysia in instituting a trilateral regime of maritime domain awareness in the TBA based on three main pillars of action:

- coordinated marine policing, modelled after the Malacca Strait patrol system that was first forged between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in 2004
- qualified rights of hot pursuit, granted on a case-by-case basis
- the establishment of national focal points that will be connected by a common hotline to facilitate intelligence sharing and dissemination.<sup>28</sup>

This combined unilateral and collective approach to securing the TBA has worked well, resulting in a significant drop in attack levels. As of January 2018, only seven actual or attempted incidents of AMC and piracy had been recorded in the Sulu and Celebes Seas during the preceding 12 months.<sup>29</sup> Assuming that these efforts are sustained, the rate of hijackings should continue to decline. That said, there's little room for complacency. The general resilience of the ASG combined with the size and archipelagic nature of the area to be monitored necessarily means that the TBA will remain a potential maritime crime hotspot for the foreseeable future.<sup>30</sup>

## The drug war

Before 2010, drug abusers in the Philippines numbered in the low hundreds of thousands,<sup>31</sup> but the country has since become one of Southeast Asia's largest manufacturers, traffickers and consumers of methamphetamine hydrochloride mixed with caffeine (commonly known as 'shabu').<sup>32</sup> Syndicates have been producing the stimulant in small, clandestine kitchen-type laboratories for at least eight years, typically using warehouses, rented houses, apartments and condominiums as bases for their operations. International organised crime groups from China provide much of the expertise for 'cooking' shabu, in addition to supplying the main precursor ingredient, pseudoephedrine.<sup>33</sup> The number of Filipino users has been estimated at around 1.8 million,<sup>34</sup> and a full 90% of the country's substance abusers take it as their drug of choice.<sup>35</sup> Consumption occurs nationally, although rates of addiction have been especially high in urban areas, particularly among bus and taxi drivers, students and teachers.<sup>36</sup> Widespread poverty, rampant corruption and extremely porous borders have all contributed to the problem, as has the cultural weight of having to maintain an Asian work ethic involving extremely long hours.<sup>37</sup>

One of Duterte's main pledges on the election trail was to initiate an unprecedented and aggressive response to the Philippines' growing drug crisis. Not only did he promise that 100,000 dealers, addicts and traffickers would be eliminated during his crackdown, he also offered bonuses to the police for every criminal body they delivered and vowed to shield from prosecution any individual who was willing to prevent the country from degenerating into a narco-state.<sup>38</sup>

He was true to his word and thousands of drug suspects have subsequently been killed. By the end of 2017, 4,000 had died at the hands of law enforcement, and another 8,000 had been murdered by unknown assailants who human rights organisations claim are vigilantes who have been emboldened by Duterte's 'call to arms.' Thus far, there has been virtually no serious effort to identify those behind the latter fatalities. To the contrary, Duterte and senior officials in his administration have publicly reviled and humiliated (and in one case jailed) civil society activists, lawyers and members of the Roman Catholic Church who have denounced the rising toll, disparaging them as unpatriotic 'obstructors of justice'.<sup>39</sup>

The global community has reacted with alarm at these figures and the apparent impunity with which the drug war is being conducted in the Philippines. In January 2018, Phelim Hine, the Deputy Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, affirmed: ‘Since Duterte will never undertake a serious investigation into the “war on drugs”, it’s up to the United Nations to support an international investigation and bring the mass killings to a stop.’<sup>40</sup> Quite possibly acting on his remarks, the following month the International Criminal Court opened a preliminary judicial inquiry into whether Manila’s policies warranted a full investigation of known human rights abuses and called on the country to accept a UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial violence.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly, there are grounds to question the morality and indeed the utility of Duterte’s offensive against the drug trade. Most of the fatalities to date have involved small-time users and dealers, while the real masterminds behind the illicit trade remain at large. At the same time, the street price of shabu has fallen while purity levels have remained largely consistent, suggesting that there has been no reduction in supply.<sup>42</sup>

That said, there are more nuanced strands to his administration’s counter-narcotics strategy that have not—understandably—received the same level of attention as the more hardline, kinetic approach that has been roundly criticised for its extrajudicial character. Particularly relevant here have been moves to incorporate quality education programs to inform vulnerable communities of the dangers of consuming methamphetamine (and other psychotropic substances), to support the family as an integral component of the rehabilitation process and to create more comprehensive community-based programs to assist recovering drug dependants.<sup>43</sup> Those initiatives reflect a somewhat more coherent view of how to deal with the illicit drug trade and are more in line with the policies of governments in the West that treat this complex, multifaceted issue as both a societal and a security challenge.

# FOREIGN POLICY

The basic thrust of Duterte's foreign policy has been to configure the Philippines' external relations in such a way as to maximise the time and space he has to pursue his domestic security priorities. To that end, he has pursued two parallel courses of action: first, to resolve outstanding disputes with Beijing in the SCS in an effort to remove what was a key source of international distraction under the Aquino administration; second, to pragmatically manage the country's bilateral partnerships to maximise potential sources of aid and assistance with the minimum risk.

## Working with China to resolve territorial disputes in the SCS

One of the PRC's core objectives in Southeast Asia is to gain assured access to what are thought to be abundant oil and gas deposits in the SCS—a region of 3.5 million square kilometres that stretches from the Taiwan Strait to Singapore and contains more than 250 small islands, atolls, cays, shoals and reefs. Beijing has asserted ownership over 90% of this maritime space, justifying its claim on initial discovery and historical disputes that date back to the 2nd century BC. The geographical extent of Chinese claims has also been variously represented in maps depicting 9, 10 and 11 dashed lines, the most recent of which was circulated to the UN in 2009 (Figure 1).<sup>44</sup>

Figure 1: Competing claims in the South China Sea



Source: Wikimedia Foundation Inc., [online](#).

The PRC has taken several steps to (literally) give concrete expression to its self-defined territorial holdings in the SCS, most recently fortifying artificial reefs that have been constructed out of reclaimed land in the Paracel and Spratly Island chains with ports, runways, aircraft hangars and anti-missile systems.<sup>45</sup> These actions—together with earlier administrative directives and naval deployments that have also incorporated the Scarborough Shoal and Macclesfield Bank<sup>46</sup>—have brought China into direct conflict with the Philippines (and Vietnam), as much of the territory where Beijing has been active falls well within Manila's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The most contentious region covers the Spratlys, which lie only a few hundred kilometres from Palawan and which Manila formally incorporated as part of its national space in 1978 (as the 'Kalayaan Island Group').<sup>47</sup>



In January 2013, the Philippines initiated arbitration proceedings at The Hague, contesting Chinese claims over all features in the SCS that fall within its EEZ. Three years later, the Permanent Court of Arbitration backed Manila's position, declaring that there was no evidence that the PRC had historic rights to the waters or resources contained within its dashed-line territorial depiction of the region and was violating the Philippines' sovereign rights by operating there. Beijing had expressed strong concerns from the start about the arbitration process—presumably in part because it anticipated the Permanent Court of Arbitration would rule against Sino interests—and unsurprisingly dismissed the court's adjudication as 'illegal and invalid'.<sup>48</sup>

The Philippines' recourse to legal avenues was part of a general policy shift under the Aquino administration that totally reversed its predecessor's preference for dealing with China on a bilateral basis and jointly developing resources in disputed waters.<sup>49</sup> The new approach—multilateral talks with all claimant states and a final international ruling on border demarcation—significantly heightened tensions between Manila and Beijing, which were at an all-time low by the time Aquino left office. Although the Duterte government is still relatively young, it's evident that it's seeking once again to adopt a more acquiescent stance on the SCS.

In his first official visit as head of state, Duterte travelled to Beijing, where he made it clear that he was intent on improving Sino-Filipino relations and that a more constructive policy on resolving competing claims in the Spratlys, Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal in the SCS would be central to achieving that outcome.<sup>50</sup> This pragmatic stance was formalised in the administration's National Security Policy, which asserted that, while the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling should be upheld, the Philippines should 'tread with prudence on this complex and delicate issue and will carefully calibrate its diplomatic moves to avert the costly consequences of any potential outbreak of armed confrontations in the disputed sea region'.<sup>51</sup> Duterte has since gone on to explicitly support a return to direct, one-on-one negotiations and consensus with the PRC as the most appropriate way of handling maritime issues in areas where the two sides' sovereign claims overlap.<sup>52</sup>

Chinese President Xi Jinping has warmly welcomed these overtures, 'rewarding' the Philippines with economic aid, investment packages and lucrative trade deals. In addition, he has stressed that Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative<sup>53</sup> should be closely aligned with Manila's 'Build, Build, Build' strategy and promised further practical cooperation in areas such as poverty reduction, agricultural modernisation, infrastructure development and disaster risk management.<sup>54</sup>

This warming in relations (and the material gains it has generated) is important and isn't to be dismissed. That said, aside from securing an agreement in principle on joint development, in many ways Duterte's current stance on the SCS hasn't yielded any major breakthrough and could yet backfire. Thus far, two rounds of China-Philippines talks have taken place. Held through a so-called 'bilateral consultative mechanism' in May 2017 and February 2018, neither iteration has proven successful in achieving anything of real substance. As Prashanth Parameswaran observes:

Some of the alleged breakthroughs mentioned in media accounts are actually not new at all, such as the agreement for ASEAN and China to begin negotiations on a Code of Conduct (CoC) early next month, which was in fact already agreed to at the 20th ASEAN-China Summit last year in Manila ... Other advances also look more modest than they are being portrayed in some media accounts. Indeed, beyond vaguely noting that both sides had found 'a number of possible cooperative initiatives' under the technical working groups in various areas—including marine environmental protection, fisheries, scientific research, and oil and gas—the joint press release actually reads quite similar to previous discussions both sides have had.<sup>55</sup>

More seriously, Chinese militarisation in the Spratlys and Paracels continues unabated, which the US, Australia and Japan have all repeatedly stressed not only threatens the rules-based regional order but also could compromise freedom of navigation in the region.<sup>56</sup> This poses as much a potential threat to the Philippines as it does to any other country that relies on the SCS as a critical channel for trade, transport and vital import-export movements.

## The pursuit of an independent foreign policy

Duterte's rapprochement with Beijing over the SCS disputes needs to be seen in the wider context of what he has termed is an 'independent foreign policy'. As explained by Manila's ambassador to China, Jose Santiago Santa Romana, this approach reflects a recognition of changing power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific that's essentially aimed at furthering the country's national interests by better aligning its interactions with external partners. He delineates three core elements that are central to this particular course of action:

- lessening Manila's dependence on the US
- improving relations with China
- establishing ties with non-traditional partners such as Russia.

In essence, this amounts to a hedging strategy, which is aimed at finding a 'geo-political sweet-spot' where the Philippines can maximise its returns from as many different powers as possible, while simultaneously offsetting longer term risks.<sup>57</sup>

Initially, Duterte's pursuit of an independent foreign policy appeared to be a reckless rush to the PRC and Russia at the expense of the Manila's historical alliance with the US. Certainly, that was the impression Duterte gave when on his first official visit to China he pointedly announced the Manila's imminent economic and military separation from Washington and affirmed an unwavering resolve to join with Beijing and Moscow.<sup>58</sup> Duterte's subsequent overtures to Xi Jinping in the economic realm (see above) and then his widely publicised efforts to consolidate military procurement and technical cooperation agreements with Vladimir Putin in 2017<sup>59</sup> further reinforced the impression that the new president was bent on overseeing a seismic shift in the country's foreign policy direction.

To be sure, Duterte may very well want to recalibrate the Philippines' traditional foreign bilateral partnerships, given Washington's past harsh criticism of his war on drugs<sup>60</sup> as well as his own ideological bias, which has always been antagonistic to American values and influence and more in tune with those of China and Russia.<sup>61</sup> That said, much of Duterte's earlier vitriolic rhetoric seems to have been just that—rhetoric—and Manila's ties to the US remain deep, broad and enduring.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in many ways this is integral to the goal of hedging should his drives to Moscow and Beijing fail to deliver the expected dividends.

Nearly two years into the Duterte presidency, there's considerable continuity in American-Filipino relations. The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the 1998 Visiting Forces Agreement, the 2011 Manila Declaration and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement—the foundations of the bilateral defence alliance—are all intact.<sup>63</sup> The two countries continue to conduct regular joint training exercises, including the long-established Balikatan ('Shoulder to Shoulder') drills.<sup>64</sup> And while some military engagements, such as Phiblex and Carat, have been cancelled, new ones like Kamandag ('Cooperation of the Warriors of the Sea') and Tempest West<sup>65</sup> have been initiated in their place.<sup>66</sup>

On top of all this, the current National Security Policy explicitly reaffirms the centrality of the Manila–Washington alliance:

The US remains as the sole defense treaty ally of the Philippines ... it is expected that the US will remain to be engaged; the Philippines will still seek to work closely with the US on a number of significant security and economic issues.<sup>67</sup>

In many ways, rather than adopting an independent foreign policy, Manila appears to be moving more towards an 'interdependent' stance in its external relations, maintaining traditional partnerships (the US) while seeking to diversify ties with new powers (China and Russia). Although that may not have been Duterte's original intent, it's largely consistent with the postures of past Philippines presidents and is certainly one that would seem best for the country's national security interests today.<sup>68</sup>

# IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA

Canberra has a well-established security relationship with Manila, the basic thrust of which has been to boost the professionalism and effectiveness of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in addressing internal threats. In recent years, that remit has been progressively expanded to the AFP, which has received growing assistance in the area of counterterrorism. Given that a central focus of the Duterte administration has been on domestic stability, there's much that Australia can do to facilitate moves in that direction.

## Islamist terrorism

Australia could do at least three things in the fight against Islamist-inspired terrorism in Mindanao. First, the capacity-building programs of the Australian Federal Police with the PNP should be continued and possibly expanded—although there would have to be a clear vetting process in place to ensure that those receiving training haven't been involved in any extrajudicial action undertaken as part of Duterte's counter-narcotics campaign.<sup>69</sup> Priority areas should focus on the major law enforcement deficits and weaknesses that continue to stymie effective national counterterrorism efforts: corruption, insufficient forensic skills, poor understanding of the fundamentals of community policing, stovepiping of intelligence, inadequate intra-agency coordination and cooperation, and a general lack of discipline in preserving evidence at crime scenes.<sup>70</sup>

Second, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) could build on its engagement with the Philippines military, which began in earnest with the conclusion of a status of visiting forces agreement in 2012.<sup>71</sup> Since then, the range of counterterrorism cooperation has grown in scope and intensity and now includes urban warfare training; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support; command, control and communication assistance; post-conflict rehabilitation; counter-narratives to blunt the rhetoric of violent extremism; bilateral maritime patrols; and regular joint military exercises (for example, exercises Dusk Caracha, Dawn Caracha and Balikatan).<sup>72</sup> This portfolio of engagement could be further enriched through the institution of mutually beneficial programs that focus on a two-way exchange of knowledge and experience in specialist small unit tactics; counterinsurgency operations; logistics; recruitment and personnel management; and civil-military relations.

Third, Canberra could give added emphasis to the Mindanao peace process. As noted, a successful resolution to the MILF conflict would significantly narrow the space available to the ASG as well as free up resources that could then be redirected to the counterterrorism mission. Aid programs addressing poverty and underdevelopment have already played a useful role in offsetting Moro grievances.<sup>73</sup> They should be continued even if a final deal is reached, as they will help to boost the functionality and viability of the proposed BJE. In addition, Australia's own history and experience of federalism could be leveraged to inform the make-up of future devolved areas in the southern Philippines.<sup>74</sup>

## The CPP-NPA insurgency

Options and opportunities for affecting the CPP-NPA insurgency are far more limited. Historically, Canberra has had little, if anything, to do with this conflict, which successive Philippines administrations have largely tended to regard as a purely internal matter.<sup>75</sup> That said, efforts to enhance the professionalism of the security forces and reduce marginalisation in Mindanao (where there's a relatively strong communist presence) would presumably have an ancillary positive spillover effect that could open up new exploratory avenues for enticing the rebels to return to the negotiating table.

## Addressing AMC and piracy in the Sulu and Celebes seas

As noted, while AMC and piracy in the Sulu and Celebes seas have been successfully addressed in the short term, this particular maritime zone will remain a likely hub for attacks for the foreseeable future. Such a scenario is especially true of Philippines waters in the TBA due to the highly porous nature of this area, the entrenched presence of ASG Sahiron loyalists in the region and the lack of adequate surveillance and interdiction assets that the government can bring to bear. The ADF could assist in ameliorating that potential by providing Manila with advisory assistance on how best to enhance maritime domain awareness and by expanding the remit of bilateral maritime patrols that are already being undertaken for the purposes of counterterrorism. Canberra could also usefully support the maintenance, further operational development and replication of the coastal radar and monitoring stations that were originally set up in the Sulu and Celebes seas as part of the Coast Watch South initiative.<sup>76</sup> If linked to similar platforms in Indonesia and Malaysia, they could provide the Philippines with an important additional tool for mitigating maritime threats emanating both from its own waters as well as from those of its neighbours.

## The drug war

In relation to the drug war, Australia could usefully support the non-kinetic aspects of the counter-narcotics campaign, drawing on its own considerable experience of instituting innovative demand-reduction programs. The Australian Federal Police should also quietly impress on the PNP that conducting off-the-book operations in the name of defending the 'national interest' not only poses inherent dangers to the legitimacy and professionalism of the country's law enforcement community, it could also seriously degrade the wider fabric of civil society, with consequences for security and cohesion. At the same time, Canberra should remain consistent in condemning the spate of extrajudicial killings currently taking place in the Philippines as a fundamental violation of human rights. This message should be articulated through a controlled line of diplomacy that's firm in tone but which avoids the use of unnecessary—and, in the context of the Duterte presidency, almost certainly counterproductive—invective language.

## South China Sea disputes

Although the SCS disputes are neither a domestic Philippine security threat nor an issue that Australia is directly involved in, Canberra has substantial interests in maintaining the stability of the SCS, which it considers to be one of the major strategic fault lines in East Asia. The Chinese state's use of military facilities, systems and platforms to assert unilateral control over the SCS is a disturbing indicator of how the leadership in Beijing sees the employment of its growing military power more broadly. This would seem to be an appropriate national security concern for all regional nations, including the Philippines, even if Manila is willing for now to downplay PRC actions that are directly affecting its sovereignty.

Canberra has expressed growing concern over China's construction and militarisation of artificial features in maritime spaces that the Permanent Court of Arbitration has ruled to lie within the sovereign jurisdiction of the Philippines, portraying those activities as a threat to both freedom of navigation and the rules-based regional order. The Turnbull government has explicitly called for a peaceful resolution to competing claims in the SCS and fully



backed the arbitration tribunal's 2016 judgement in favour of Manila's position on the Spratlys, Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal.<sup>77</sup> Duterte's more conciliatory stance to Beijing on the legal ownership of disputed islands in this area hasn't altered that basic posture, which was made clear in Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper:

Australia is particularly concerned by the unprecedented pace and scale of China's activities [in the SCS]. Australia opposes the use of disputed features and artificial structures in the South China Sea for military purposes. We support the resolution of differences through negotiations based on international law ... The government reaffirms its position that the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the Philippines South China Sea arbitration is final and binding on both parties.<sup>78</sup>

Australia's future policy on the SCS, both with respect to the Philippines and more generally, will thus almost certainly continue to stress the need for a negotiated settlement in accordance with accepted norms of international behaviour. Canberra should impress on Manila the need to uphold the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling as providing the appropriate legal context for initiating bilateral talks, affirming that a consensus arising out of that diplomacy that reflects this judgement would be fully endorsed. Equally, Canberra needs to be clear in its commitment to keeping sea lanes open, reiterating support for nations that, like Australia, conduct overflight and freedom of navigation operations as a viable means of doing so (an approach that the Philippines has adopted in the past and now also appears to be taking).<sup>79</sup>

# NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Malcolm Cook, *Turning back? Philippine security policy under Duterte*, Lowy Institute, Sydney, 27 June 2016.
- 2 Ananda Domingo-Almase, 'Role, conception and conduct of Duterte's security policy', *IAPS Dialogue*, 31 January 2018, [online](#).
- 3 The MNLF was established in 1972 and historically served as the main vehicle for pursuing the violent national (as opposed to Islamist) Moro cause in the southern Philippines. After 30 years of insurgent war, the group eventually signed a peace deal with Manila in 1996 (the Davao Consensus) that provided for the creation of a limited, four-province autonomous region in Mindanao. See Peter Chalk, 'The Davao Consensus: a panacea for the Muslim Insurgency in Mindanao?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1997, 9(2):79–98.
- 4 The MILF broke from the MNLF on account of the latter's more nationalist (as opposed to religious) focus and willingness to settle for autonomy rather than full independence (which remained a non-negotiable demand until 2003, when the MILF's hardline founder and leader, Hashim Salamat, died). See Peter Chalk, *Rebuilding while performing: military modernisation in the Philippines*, ASPI, Canberra, June 2014, 8, [online](#).
- 5 Interviews, Manila, January 2017. See also Cook, *Turning back? Philippine security policy under Duterte*, 5–6.
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- 12 Cook, *Turning back? Philippine security policy under Duterte*, 6–7; Jasper Acosta, 'Duterte visits MILF camp in Sultan Kudarat', *ABS-CBN News Central Mindanao*, 27 February 2017, [online](#).
- 13 Victor Reyes, 'AFP goals for 2018: reduce NPA strength, defeat Sayyaf and BIFF', *Malaya Business Insight*, 10 January 2018; Bong Sarmiento, 'Philippines vows to crush "weakened" Abu Sayyaf Terror Group'.
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- 15 Chalk, *Rebuilding while performing: military modernisation in the Philippines*, 7.
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- 26 See ReCAAP annual reports, 2016 and 2017, [online](#).
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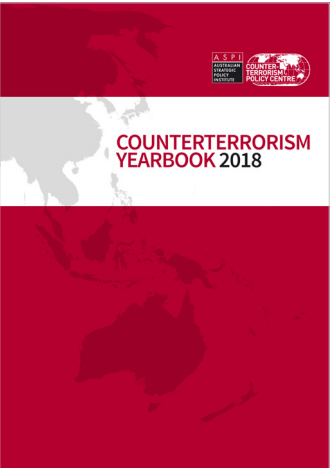
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- 59 In October 2017, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and his Russian counterpart, General Sergey Shougu, inked the Agreement for Military-Technical Cooperation, which provides a framework for instituting joint research, production support, training, and, possibly, the exchange of subject matter experts. That same month, Lorenzana signed a contract with Alexander Mikheev, the Director General of Rosobronexport, allowing the Philippines to procure defence articles from the Russian state-owned agency. Moscow followed this up with a donation of 5,000 AK-74Ms rifles, 1 million rounds of 1943-type ammunition, 5,000 steel helmets and 20 Ural 4320 multi-purpose vehicles. See Prashanth Parameswaran, 'Russia-Philippines military ties get an October boost', *The Diplomat*, 26 October 2017; Frances Mangosing, 'PH, Russia sign military-technical cooperation agreement', *The Inquirer*, 24 October 2017; Alexis Romero, Jaime Laude, 'Philippines, Russia ink pact on military, technical cooperation', *The Philippine Star*, 25 October 2017.
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- 73 For further details of these programs, see Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Overview of Australia's aid program to the Philippines*, [online](#).
- 74 Cook, *Turning back? Philippine security policy under Duterte*, 13.
- 75 It should be noted that since 2004 Manila has conceded to hold peace talks in a neutral third country—Norway.
- 76 Coast Watch South (CWS) was modelled after a similar system that has been up and running in Australia for several years. It consists of radar monitoring stations in the Sulu and Celebes Seas that have both surveillance and monitoring capabilities and are connected through a central command centre. In 2011 Manila decided to replicate CWS country-wide, and in 2015 a National Coast Watch System (NCWS) was inaugurated. Still a work in progress, this will act as the main instrument for enhancing interagency coordination and maritime security across the Philippines archipelago. The Coast Guard, Navy, Maritime Group of the Philippine National Police, Philippine Center on Transnational Crime, National Bureau of Investigations, Bureau of Customs, National Prosecution Service of the Department of Justice, Bureau of Immigration and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources are among the key partner agencies that will provide the human resources, equipment and material in support of the NCWS mandate. See Philippine Coast Guard, 'National Coast Guard Center officially inaugurates in Manila', media release, 30 April 2015, [online](#); Anthony Bergin, 'Partnering with the Philippines', *The Strategist*, 6 May 2014, [online](#); Carmela Fonbuena, 'Inside the "brain" of the Philippine maritime law enforcement operations', *The Rappler*, 1 May 2015.
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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AMC	armed maritime crime
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
BBL	Bangsamoro Basic Law
BJE	Bangsamoro Judicial Entity
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
GDP	gross domestic product
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
NPA	New People's Army
PNP	Philippine National Police
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
TBA	tri-border area

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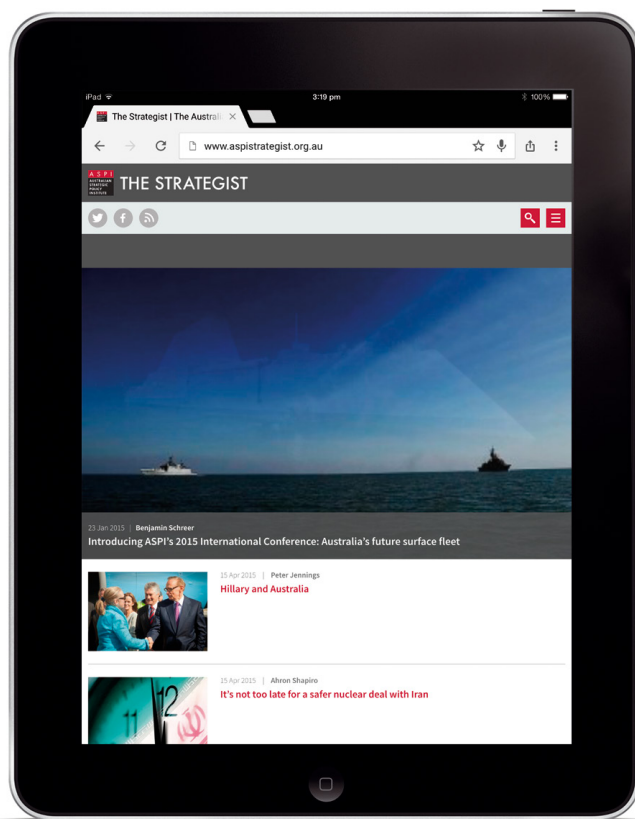


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**National security in the Philippines under Duterte:**  
Shooting from the hip or pragmatic partnerships beyond  
the noise?