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Disarming the Bearer of the Sword:

Delinking the *Abu Sayyaf* Group From the Global Insurgency

by

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A paper proposal submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper proposal reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the U. S. Navy.

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23 October 2006

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INTRODUCTION

On May 27, 2001, the *Abu Sayyaf Group* (ASG), an *Al Qaeda* affiliate, gained worldwide notoriety when it attacked a popular vacation resort on the Philippine island of Palawan. Thirty tourists were kidnapped for ransom. One of the vacationers, Guillermo Sobero, was an American from Corona, California. Weeks after the kidnapping the ASG announced it had beheaded Sobero. Also abducted was an American missionary couple, Martin and Gracia Burnham of Wichita, Kansas.³ After a year in captivity in the dense, mountainous jungles of Mindanao, an injured Gracia Burnham was rescued by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Tragically, her husband was killed during the fierce skirmish of the rescue attempt.⁴

On February 26, 2004, just outside of Manila Bay, an ASG bomb exploded and sank a super ferry bound for Mindanao, killing 194 people.⁵ In February 18, 2006 in the predominately Muslim region of the Southern Philippines, ASG rebels bombed a bar just outside the gate of the AFP Headquarters on the island of Jolo, killing one individual and injuring 22 others. Nearby, soldiers of the AFP and U.S. Special Forces gathered for *BALIKATAN* 06 (“shoulder to shoulder”), part of an ongoing series of bilateral training exercises between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines.⁶

Since Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) disrupted *Al Qaeda*’s safe haven in Afghanistan, Southeast Asia has become an important sanctuary for the global *jihad*. The archipelagic nations of the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia provide a labyrinth of islands that offers a complex factor of time-space-force, making this region an ideal crossroads for international terrorism.⁷ The ASG in the Southern Philippines

represents one of the region's firebrand insurgencies and had been linked to Osama bin Laden and his global aims to establish an Islamic caliphate.

David J. Kilcullen, Chief Strategist for Counterterrorism in the U.S. Department of State, asserts that *Al Qaeda* and its associated movement like the ASG are not a global network of terrorists; rather, these groups have aggregated to become a global insurgency or jihad.⁸ **In order for regional peace and stability to take root, the United States and its Long War ally, the Philippines, must eliminate more effectively the global linkages and conditions that allow support and refuge for the ASG.**

Professors John Waghelstein and Don Chisholm, from the Naval War College, stress the criticality of first properly analyzing an insurgency. This will be a starting point for this analysis. The two authors developed an insurgent taxonomy that is defined through a set of thematic questions that provides the tools to systematically dissect an insurgency. This paper will focus on two of these questions: underlying issues and support of the ASG.⁹

Subsequently, delinking, as Kilcullen proposes, severs the ties to the global actors and attacks the root causes that fuel local grievances.¹⁰ Also, it is the delinking of support relationships that will help isolate regional insurgents from the global *jihad*. To invigorate Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-PHILIPPINES (OEF-P) efforts, action must be taken to delink the underlying issues and ties that give support to the ASG insurgency. Moreover, to successfully quell the Islamic extremists in the Southern Philippines, a more holistic counterinsurgency (COIN) approach must be employed.¹¹

BACKGROUND OF PHILIPPINE INSURGENCIES

The Philippines has been plagued by insurgencies throughout its history. Two different ideological groups currently complicate the Philippine government's COIN efforts. The focus in the Northern provinces involves a Communist insurgency (National People's Army (NPA)), which seeks to establish a Marxist state, while several Muslim secessionist movements in the southern part of the country occupy the efforts of the AFP.

The Muslim secessionist movement in the Southern Philippines can be traced back centuries to the resistance to Spanish colonization. These Muslim groups aspire to secede from the Philippines and form a separate *Bangsamoro* (Islamic State).¹² The secessionist movement is comprised mainly of three Muslim groups: the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the ASG.

The MNLF was founded by Misuari in 1971 and has clashed with the AFP for several decades. In 1996, peace talks between the MNLF and the Philippine government resulted in Misuari's election as the regional governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Although the result was not independence, autonomy gave the Muslims a voice and stake in the political process in that part of the country.¹³

In 1975, due to ideological and political differences, a faction within the MNLF split from the group. This splinter group became the MILF. Where the MNLF seemed to concede its independence goals to an established autonomy, the MILF continued the insurgency to establish an independent Islamic state.

The smallest and last secessionist group is the ASG. The ASG is also a splinter group comprised of former MNLF and MILF members. Like the two other Filipino-Muslim (Moro) insurgencies, a separate Islamic state is an ASG goal; but ASG's links

with *Al Qaeda* make their primary focus one that asserts the influence and dominance of Islam into global politics to establish an Islamic caliphate.¹⁴

LINKS TO THE GLOBAL *JIHAD*

The ASG's name in Arabic literally means "Bearer of the Sword." In 1989, the ASG was founded by Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani. Janjalani and his younger brother, Khadaffy, received training and fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. It was in Afghanistan that the brothers were influenced by both bin Laden and the *Wahhabi* variant of Islam. The elder Janjalani was killed in a firefight with the AFP on the island of Basilan in December 1998.¹⁵

When bin Laden wanted to expand his *Al Qaeda* network, he sought Janjalani's assistance to establish a Southeast Asia cell. With the lack of a strong central government, the Philippine Islands were an attractive option for *Al Qaeda*. Moreover, this new "Moro" cell would prove to be an important base for terrorist operations.¹⁶

Philippine National Police sources indicate that the architect of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yoesef, used the ASG as a support base. In late 1991, at bin Ladin's request, Yoesef traveled to Basilan to teach ASG militants the art of bomb making. Furthermore, financial backing has come from sources such as bin Laden's own brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, who personally arranged initial funding for ASG through one of the Islamic charities he operated in the Philippines.¹⁷

UNDERLYING ISSUES

The underlying issues that fuel the ASG, MNLF, and MILF stem from the struggles of Muslims for justice and self-determination. Muslim grievances are ingrained from perceptions of under representation, corruption, and socioeconomic disparities.

Under Representation

One of the major grievances for the Moros is the continued imbalance in their representation in senior civilian and military positions. This particular disparity gives ASG's goal of secession some hint of legitimacy. Muslims cite, as a source of contention, the lack of proportional Muslim representation in national government institutions.¹⁸

For example, unlike the U.S. Senate, the Philippine Senate is composed of 24 senators who do not represent any particular geographical district.¹⁹ To the disdain of Muslims, senators are elected from a nationwide list and this tends to favor established political figures from the Manila area. Currently, there are no Muslim cabinet members and no Muslim senators. Consequently, the perceived political inequality does little for bridging the seams between the two cultures, does very little to build trust, and pushes a disgruntled Muslim populace to sympathize with ASG's political aims.

Corruption

The lack of trust between the two cultures is further amplified by a justifiable public perception of corruption in the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of the Manila-based government.²⁰ What is indicative of the endemic corruption in the Philippines is also, arguably, one of the biggest obstacles to containing the ASG—and that is the widespread corruption that permeates the AFP. Suspicions concerning the genuine solidarity of an AFP effort in the South effectively sabotage the already difficult pursuit. Accusations of “bought” AFP leaders allowing ASG guerillas to escape are occasional topics of discussion in local newspapers and perpetuate a climate of distrust.

This culture of corruption has even caused instability within the ranks of the AFP and is highlighted in the July 2003 *coup* attempt against President Arroyo. The mutineers were led by a group of junior officers from the AFP who were frustrated about the rampant corruption in the AFP, aging equipment, low wages, and poor housing. Additionally, allegations that senior officers had sold weapons and ammunition to the Muslim guerrillas in Mindanao fueled the resolve of the mutineers. As a case in point, when a known ASG leader was killed in 2003, it was noted that he possessed expensive night vision goggles (NVG) that U.S. soldiers had provided to Philippine forces they had recently trained. Even more disturbing was the fact that NVG's were given to AFP officers that were members of an elite anti-terrorist rapid reaction force selected and trained by the Pentagon in 2002.²¹

Socioeconomic Disparities

Historically, the Christian majority of the Philippines have marginalized the Muslims. The national culture, with its emphasis on familial, tribal, and regional loyalties, have created informal barriers whereby access to jobs or resources is provided first to those of one's own family or group network. Consequently, Muslims frequently complain about socioeconomic impediments when renting rooms or applying for jobs against their Christian counterparts. Moreover, the Muslim majority in Mindanao have historically lagged far behind the rest of the country in most aspects of socioeconomic development. Poverty levels in Mindanao are twice as high as the national average.²²

These underlying issues represent only a portion of the grievances that foster an environment of instability—an ideal situation for insurgents like the ASG. The seams

that result because of these three issues are difficult, but not impossible, to repair. Until changes occur, the ASG will continue to assert their legitimacy by mobilizing popular support, both internally and externally.

SUPPORT TO THE ASG

No insurgency can survive long without some degree of popular support. Waghelstein and Chisholm contend that state-based militaries or conventional combat operations do not depend on the population.²³ The insurgents, however, demand or depend on the population or external actors for support. COIN efforts must identify this support and interdict these ties where they are vulnerable. ASG support can be internal, external, and when associated with local support can be either active or passive.

Internal Support to the ASG

Those who actively support the ASG are typically members of the Muslim community who have direct links or are sympathetic to the insurgents. This type of support group, for instance, may provide transportation, shelter, or security and are usually compensated by the ASG.²⁴ Aggrieved Muslims that provide active support may eventually become ASG members. What is disturbing is like the NPA, ASG has been known to recruit children as both soldiers and as noncombatants.²⁵ The U.S. State Department's Country Report on Human Rights reveals that a significant number of ASG members staffing the groups' camps are teenagers. Moreover, reports indicate that the ASG has taken advantage of some of the madrassas in the Mindanao region to indoctrinate children and to use these children as couriers and spies.²⁶

Passive support, on the other hand, usually comes in the form of “silent compliance” to the ASG and refusal to cooperate with the local authorities. This type of support typically applies to the majority of the Muslim population and is coerced through the threat of ASG reprisals or the inherent distrust for the national government and the AFP. Unfortunately, the only interaction the populace has with the government is the frequent visits of the AFP. This, however, is seen as a pacification campaign against fellow Muslims and perpetuates the “silence.”²⁷

External Support to the ASG

External support for the ASG is received from both regional and global actors. From a regional perspective, the Indonesian based terrorist group *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), also an *Al Qaeda* affiliate and part of the global *jiḥād*, has been linked with ASG. JI has the proclaimed goal of creating a Southeast Asian Muslim state involving territories from Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia.²⁸ JI has been responsible for a series of regional bombings to include Bali in 2002 and Davao in 2003.²⁹ In 2002, JI’s acting emir, Abu Rusdan, ordered JI operatives to forge a stronger alliance with the ASG. This resulted in JI operatives training in ASG camps on Tawi Tawi and Basilan.³⁰ Likewise, Khadaffy Janjalani has been reported to have funded JI bombings such as the synchronized 2005 Valentine’s Day bombings which left 12 dead and 130 injured.³¹ One Philippine intelligence official stated that, “Khadaffy is consolidating radicals...and he has the money to support religious hardliners....”³² These coordinated efforts are indicative of ASG’s willingness to conduct joint operations with other insurgents.

ASG's links to external support from global actors such *Al Qaeda* and nation states like the former Iraqi regime have been documented. At the global level, *Al Qaeda* provides encouragement, tactical support, finance, and intelligence.³³ As mentioned earlier, ASG financial support from Islamic charities, such as the Saudi-Arabia-based International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), were set up by Arab-Muslims like bin Laden's brother-in-law Khalifa. Additionally, captured Iraqi documents indicate that up until June 2001, the Hussein regime provided financial support to the ASG.³⁴ Subsequently, in August 2006, the U.S. Department of Treasury designated the Philippine and Indonesian branch offices of the IIRO as entities that have assisted in significant fundraising efforts for *Al Qaeda*, ASG and JI.³⁵ While other foreign links, such as Libya, have been discovered, the financial links to *Al Qaeda* have been the most significant.³⁶

Yoesef was earlier mentioned as an *Al Qaeda* operative that provided explosives training to ASG members in the early 1990's. Yoesef also established an *Al Qaeda* cell in Manila and had planned to assassinate then Pope John Paul II and plant bombs aboard 12 U.S. airliners. While some claim that *Al Qaeda* tactical support for the ASG has declined in recent years, other reports claim "foreign Muslims" were still training ASG on Mindanao to conduct urban terrorism.³⁷

With underlying issues and sources of support placed into context, significant challenges lay ahead in delinking regional and global ties to the ASG. While efforts to date have shown progress, more efficient efforts and resources must be employed to delink and isolate the ASG from the populace and external actors.

DELINKING LOCAL ISSUES FROM THE ASG

Kilcullen contends that a delinking strategy doesn't necessarily require the destruction of the entire the ASG. Instead, Kilcullen would argue that it is a matter of delinking Muslims and ASG's local grievances from the greater global insurgency.³⁸ This can be achieved in the Philippines through strategies to improve political representation, reduce corruption, improve security, and address socioeconomic problems. A few underlying issues have been identified and must first be addressed in order for COIN efforts to be effective.

Typical counterterrorist efforts focus only on the operational portion of the *jihadist* cycle or the visible tip of the iceberg, which RAND analyst Brian Jenkins asserts is from the recruitment process to death or capture of the insurgent. He further adds that insufficient attention is made to the base of the iceberg, where the process of radicalization and indoctrination takes place and lead to recruitment.³⁹

With respect to the issue of under representation, one solution would involve a willingness on the part of the Philippine government to amend its political structure. For example, revamping the election of senators by region, instead of a popular listing, would improve the legitimacy of the government. Although this would require a constitutional amendment, it would provide Muslims and other remote areas to be properly represented by individuals from their specific region.⁴⁰

Kilcullen acknowledges that efforts should be made to further isolate ASG by resolving conflict with a local actor, the MILF. Although the MILF seeks regional self-government, it does not associate itself with the global *jihad*.⁴¹ Improving Moro

autonomy through self governance would help delink and neutralize MILF members and create exploitable seams between the ASG and MILF.

The issue of corruption is a difficult problem to solve given its deep roots in Filipino culture and way of life. In dealing specifically with the AFP, major reforms must be instituted to address the causes of military corruption. Like in the Hukbalahap Insurgency, then Filipino Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay, allotted financial resources to address the issues of low pay and poor housing for the AFP and this eliminated the temptation for troops to extort and accept bribes.⁴²

The elimination of endemic corruption may take a great and moral leader in the mold of Magsaysay to demand and inspire institutional reforms. One of Professor Kalev Sepp's successful COIN practices is finding a great charismatic and dynamic leader to institute change; however, a great moral and just leader may not be in the Filipino forecast.⁴³ Even so, the United States and other allied countries could help develop a base of professional and moral officers by considerably increasing educational opportunities such as the service colleges. This would be a slow process but it is a step in the right direction. Zachary Abuza, a Southeast Asia expert on terrorism, succinctly surmised the military corruption problem, "While individual Filipino soldiers have demonstrated remarkable valor in the field, too many of their leaders have enriched themselves at their subordinates' expense."⁴⁴

While it is true that *Malacanang* Palace needs to reform its government and military structures, an attainable, short-term goal could be improving the socioeconomic plight of the Moros in the South. To promote Sepp's best practices of denying insurgent safe havens, establishing secure areas, and focusing on the people local security must be

established.⁴⁵ Once security is set, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO) would have better access to remote areas of the Southern Philippines.

Forty-six percent of the Philippines' population lives on \$2 a day or less. Mindanao is one of the poorest regions and has been home to separatist conflict for years. NGO's such as USAID have worked with the Philippine government to strengthen the foundation for peace. Sepp's COIN best practice of amnesty and rehabilitation of insurgents would favor social programs and education that give former combatants job skills to help reintegrate them into their communities.⁴⁶ At the local level, USAID has helped seven cities in Mindanao and about three dozen municipalities design and carry out good governance and anti-corruption programs.⁴⁷

DELINKING SUPPORT FROM THE ASG

Kilcullen's re-conceptualization of the Long War in terms of a three-tiered campaign at global, regional and local levels helps define Long War efforts in terms of delinking support.⁴⁸ Similarly, Steven Metz and Raymond Millen advocate that the military and other governmental agencies need to develop an effects-based approach designed to fracture, delegitimize, delink, demoralize, and desource the insurgents.⁴⁹

To isolate and delink the ASG and gain back local support of the Muslim population, the Philippine government, with U.S. help, must first conduct a robust information operations (IO) campaign. This IO campaign would be the bedrock upon which COIN efforts would rest to establish Kilcullen's three pillars of security, political and economic.⁵⁰ The IO effort would counter ASG propaganda, isolate the ASG, and win back the populace's hearts and minds.⁵¹

Waghelstein and Chisholm, however, would raise the question: does the government have the capacity or legitimacy to address these grievances?⁵² It is unlikely the Filipino government has the adequate capacity to alleviate the grievances on its own. An effective IO campaign, however, can build the perception that the government has a legitimate interest in improving stability, peace, and prosperity within the Muslim region and can help counter ASG propaganda. Moreover, a highly visible and combined Filipino effort to address under representation, end corruption, and decrease socioeconomic disparities may begin to mend the seams between the Muslims and government.

Regionally, Kilcullen would advocate taking measures to delink the ASG from the JI. Interdicting links to the JI would help further isolate the ASG. Furthermore, to be able to defeat the ASG, the United States and other Southeast Asian nations must work together to eliminate sanctuaries for the both the ASG and JI. Indicative of this cooperation is on October 2005, a Status of Forces Agreement between the Philippines and Australia was signed that will permit Australia to support Manila's fight against terrorism by establishing joint exercises similar to the *BALIKATAN* exercises.⁵³

Globally, the United States and the Philippines must sever ASG ties with *Al Qaeda*. Global actors like *Al Qaeda* feed on local grievances, integrate them into the larger Islamic *jihad*, and then link other unrelated conflicts through a globalized system of communications, finance, and technology.⁵⁴ Moreover, *Al Qaeda* has evolved in its role and is now the propaganda hub for the global *jihad*.⁵⁵ Delinking efforts such as the U.S. Department of Treasury's action to sever the links of Islamic charities such as the

IIRO, needs to be aggressively employed.⁵⁶ But more must be done to weed out other sources of ASG financial support and delink these funding chains.

COUNTERPOINT

There are those who would argue delinking the ASG from the global insurgency is neither applicable nor possible in this case. Others would say the ASG is not part of the global *jihad*, rather, they are a decentralized criminal element that lack the unity of command and effort to reach their stated goals. Some contend that this is another example of “a war of the flea” and that the ASG does not have to win, rather, they just need to avoid losing.

A Philippine-based journalist, Steven Rogers, declared that Washington has a flawed view of the ASG insurgency and has treated this as a case of violent extremists terrorizing the local population. Washington also has emphasized the links to Al Qaeda and JI but has failed to recognize that none of these terrorists created the Moro conflict. Moreover, the local grievances predate OEF-P by centuries, and neither military might nor money will end the crisis in the Southern Philippines.⁵⁷

Due to Philippine constitutional restrictions, the U.S. military has been hamstrung to only advising and training the AFP. Southeast Asian expert, Zachary Abuza argues that while the AFP has taken well to U.S. training, the AFP still lacks the capability and resources to defeat the ASG. He further professes the AFP is short on integrity and the prevalent corruption renders them ineffective in combating the ASG.⁵⁸

The bottom line, according to Waghelstein, “...is we can’t fight and win someone else’s insurgency.”⁵⁹ With regard to the Philippine government, does the United States have the leverage to compel Manila to make the magnitude of changes required to

significantly change Kilcullen's enabling environment? Some would ask, does Manila even possess the political will or motivation to solve the ASG insurgency problem? After all, from a Luzon perspective, the ASG problem is relatively far away and more important to the United States than it is to them. Some would argue that the estimated \$80 million in annual military assistance is, ironically, enough motive to not find a solution to the insurgency.⁶⁰

While the success of the joint U.S.-Filipino training exercises in combating ASG can be debated, there are some who warn that increasing the U.S. footprint could complicate the COIN dilemma. Exacerbating anti-American sentiment in the Southeast Asian region could form and strengthen a pan-Islamic solidarity in the area.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

OEF efforts in the Philippines have met with some success, but more can be done to delink the ties to global, regional, and local factors. More efforts, however, must be focused on the ideological war. The insinuation here is not to attack Islam; rather, we must shatter and delink the appeal of the Moro *jihad's* ideology from the local population. Even with future successes in the capturing and killing of ASG insurgents, efforts must be made to address underlying issues, stem insurgent recruitment, encourage defections, and turn those that are imprisoned.⁶² Within the current global *jihad* network, not all Islamist groups in Southeast Asia are necessarily aligned with *Al Qaeda* and the United States must be prudent in its COIN efforts not to embolden these groups to align with the global *jihad*.⁶³

The U.S. footprint and investment in Southeast Asia must be smaller and manageable enough to provide the necessary political leverage to motivate countries, like

the Philippines, to make necessary political and socioeconomic reforms. For example, in the 1980s the U.S. COIN footprint in El Salvador was small. It was small enough to threaten an immediate U.S. pullout and gave the U.S. military leverage to compel compliance with U.S. advice to the El Salvadoran government. Political leverage is needed in the Philippines. Military aid has to be coupled with progress in mitigating underlying grievances.

OEF-P continues with little fanfare. Events in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to overshadow the Long War efforts in the Mindanao and Sulu Archipelago jungles. With respect to OEF-P, Washington and Manila must decide what is the desired end state. Campaigns against insurgents seldom end with a decisive and clear victory. Insurgent groups are rarely eliminated. Rather, as circumstances change, insurgents like the ASG eventually become irrelevant and dormant.⁶⁴ Jenkins states the goal of terrorism is not to alter the overall military balance of power; therefore, any COIN strategy must address issues that traditionally fall outside of the military dominion. A Philippine government that demonstrates visible and tangible signs of progress in areas such as essential services, governance, and economic opportunity will nullify ASG's reasons for fighting.⁶⁵

Kilcullen's strategy of disaggregation or delinking has definite merit in dealing with the ASG. Delinking the local, regional, and *Al Qaeda* ties will help isolate the ASG. Nevertheless, as Rogers has poignantly stated, the underlying issues and the Moro insurgency have festered for centuries. Therefore, in order to more effectively delink "the bearer of the sword," the Filipino government, with some U.S. help, must first address the Moro's underlying grievances in the Southern Philippines.

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