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## Marawi City Siege and Its Aftermath: Opportunities and Challenges in Philippines-China Counterterrorism Cooperation\*

### Introduction

On May 23, 2017, armed men who claimed to be soldiers of the Islamic State (IS)<sup>1</sup> invaded Marawi City in the southern Philippines to establish what they called the province of the Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA) or the Wilayat Sharq Assiya.

Isnilon Hapilon, from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Basilan, led the armed men composed largely from members of the Maute Group in Lanao del Sur and supported by members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) from Maguindanao, Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP) from Sarangani, and foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from different parts of the Muslim world, mostly from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Arab countries.

Hapilon was the anointed amir (head) of the Daula Islamiya Wilayatul Mashriq (DIWM) or the Islamic State Province in East Asia.

Though the Marawi City siege was an internal security affair of the Philippines, it attracted the attention of many countries to be concerned because of the involvement of FTFs waging worldwide armed activities on behalf of IS. China was one of the many countries that offered help to the Philippine government to defeat IS in Marawi and to improve the capacity of the Philippine law enforcement authorities in countering threats of terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or in Arabic, DAESH (ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām).



There is no doubt that the Marawi City Siege provided opportunities for the Philippines and China to deepen and widen their bilateral cooperation, specifically in counterterrorism cooperation. But there are also challenges that both countries need to overcome if they want their cooperation to reach a higher plane.

## Counterterrorism Cooperation: A Framework for Analysis

Counterterrorism is an area of common interest where states deliberately cooperate. Existing scholarly studies on International Cooperation Theory (ICT) assert that states pursue cooperation in the state of international anarchy because of the beneficial outcome of cooperation.<sup>2</sup> ICT rejects the realist theory of international relations arguing that states are bound to compete because of colliding national interests. Realist theory contends that states are egoistic entities where they view other states as threats to their national survival. Under realist theory, states are doomed to suffer conflict among each other. But ICT maintains that states can cooperate amidst international anarchy because of the principles of reciprocation and reputation. The principle of reciprocity assumes:

If you cooperate with me, then I will cooperate with you in the future; but if you do not cooperate, then neither will. If both actors take this position – as in the famous tit-for-tat strategy pairing – then ongoing cooperation is supported against current defection incentives by actors' interest in maintaining cooperation into the future. This analysis opens up the possibility of cooperation and raises interesting questions regarding the conditions under which strategies of reciprocity promote cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

The principle of reputation, on the other hand, asserts that states maintain cooperation as a matter of national pride and prestige. ICT regards reputation as essential for effective diplomacy. Reputation encourages trust-building, which drives further cooperation.

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<sup>2</sup> Xinyua Dai, Snidal, Duncan, and Sampson, Michael. (2017). "International Cooperation Theory and International Institutions." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.

<sup>3</sup> Xinyua Dai, Snidal, Duncan, and Sampson, Michael. (2017). "International Cooperation Theory and International Institutions."





Counterterrorism drives the Philippines and China to cooperate because of their common desire to cooperate in this field. Though the Philippines and China have existing differences in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, they decide to cooperate because of the principles of reciprocity and reputation as advanced by ICT. Though ICT has its limitation in answering questions on why states still compete despite pursuing cooperation, the ICT appropriately frames why the Philippines and China decide to advance counterterrorism cooperation.

## Philippines-China Counterterrorism Cooperation before the Marawi Siege

Though the Marawi City Siege has accelerated the Philippines-China counterterrorism cooperation, both countries started their cooperation in this field in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States. Bilateral cooperation in combatting terrorism has been fully documented in the book, *Security Aspects of Philippines-China Relations: Bilateral Issues and Concerns in the Age of Global Terrorism*.<sup>4</sup>

After the 9/11 incident, the Philippines and China enhanced their defense and military cooperation to combat terrorism when the Philippines attended the 9th Summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) hosted by China in October 2001, just a month after 9/11. At the sideline of the APEC Summit, the Philippines and China signed three agreements related to counterterrorism, to wit:

- Treaty of extradition between the Philippines and China;
- Memorandum of understanding on cooperation against illicit traffic and abuse of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, and precursor chemicals; and,
- Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in combating transnational crime.

In April 2002, then-Secretary of National Defense Angelo Reyes visited China to establish bilateral defense dialogue and intelligence exchanges on many security issues including international terrorism. Secretary Reyes even explored with then Minister of Defense Chi Haotian the possibility of joint military training and exercises in countering terrorism following their

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<sup>4</sup> Banlaoi, Rommel C. (2007). *Security Aspects of Philippines-China Relations: Bilateral Issues and Concerns in the Age of Global Terrorism* (Quezon City: Rex Book Store International).





respective domestic laws. In June 2002, then-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo issued Proclamation Number 148 declaring June 9 of every year as the “Philippines-China Friendship Day.”

In September 2002, Minister Chi made a reciprocal visit to the Philippines with the theme, “Sustaining Friendship, Enhancing Cooperation.” During this visit, both countries announced the holding of the Annual Defense and Security Talk (ADST) to provide the two defense establishments an effective platform to exchange their views and outlook on regional security, South China Sea, international terrorism and non-traditional security issues. The principle of reciprocity has motivated the Philippines and China to further cooperate. The principle of reputation encourages both countries to sustain their cooperation. As a result, the Philippines and China held their first ADST in 2005 where both countries exchanged views on regional security issues, South China Sea disputes, international terrorism, and even cooperation on humanitarian assistance and search and rescue operations.

In 2013, they held their 4th ADST but was discontinued after that when the Philippines filed an internal arbitration case against China as a result of the Scarborough Stand-off in 2012.<sup>5</sup> The 5th ADST only resumed in 2017 when President Rodrigo R. Duterte pursued closer friendly ties with China. During the 5th ADST, both countries not only exchanged views on security issues of mutual interests but also identified areas of practical cooperation for mutual benefits. Aside from countering illegal drug trafficking, counterterrorism was one of the areas they identified where both countries could pursue practical cooperation.

## The Marawi Siege: Opportunities in Philippines-China Counterterrorism Cooperation

The Marawi siege provided China and the Philippines to actualize practical cooperation in combating terrorism. The Chinese government received information that ISIS-linked Uyghur militants provided financial, logistical and manpower support to the Marawi siege.<sup>6</sup> Even before the

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<sup>5</sup> For more discussions, see Ang See, Teresita and Sta. Romana, Chito. (Eds). (2013). *Philippines-China Relations: Sailing Beyond Disputed Waters*. *Chinese Studies Journal*, vol. 10. Quezon City: Philippine Association for Chinese Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a Chinese security expert, March 29, 2019.





Marawi siege, the Philippines and China already discussed in 2016 the prospect of counterterrorism cooperation under the new administration of President Rodrigo Duterte.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, during the Marawi siege, China immediately provided the Philippines counterterrorism assistance of RMB50 million covering the delivery of 3,000 assault rifles and RMB6 million rounds of ammunition to support the Philippine military's urban battle against ISIS fighters. Weapons included sniper, automatic and high-precision rifles. President Rodrigo Duterte himself tested one of them. In his speech during the handover ceremony on June 6, 2017, Chinese Ambassador to Manila Zhao Jianhua said this counterterrorism assistance "is a demonstration of our growing bilateral relationship. It's also a demonstration of a new era of a friendly and cooperative relationship between our two militaries."<sup>8</sup> China also provided the Philippines about RMB10 million worth of livelihood projects for families of Filipino troops wounded during the battle. The Marawi siege demonstrated the importance of counterterrorism cooperation to improve the overall bilateral relations between the Philippines and China.<sup>9</sup>

## Opportunities in the Aftermath of Marawi Siege

At the announcement of the liberation of Marawi on October 24, 2017, President Duterte specifically thanked China for providing weapons that killed terrorist leaders Isnilon Hapilon and Omarkhayam Maute. Though the United States also provided ground assistance during the Marawi siege in the form of intelligence exchange, tactical advise, and drone reconnaissance, President Duterte gave special attention to China's counterterrorism support.

<sup>7</sup> Banlaoi, Rommel C. "The Philippines and China: Prospects for Counterterrorism Cooperation." Paper delivered at the "Bilateral Symposium, Beyond Conflict: The Future of China-Philippines Relations," organized by Jinan University, Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, and Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research and held at Edsa Shangri-la Hotel, Ortigas Center, Philippines on July 30, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Remarks delivered by Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Zhao Jian Hua during the handover ceremony held in Clark, Pampanga on June 6, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Banlaoi, Rommel C. "Marawi City Siege and Its Aftermath: Opportunities and Challenges in Philippines-China Counterterrorism Cooperation." Paper delivered at the international conference marking the 30th Anniversary of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, held at Joy-Nostalg Hotel and Suites, Ortigas Center, Pasig City on December 2, 2017.





After the Marawi liberation, China announced another fresh aid to the Philippines amounting to RMB150 million to support the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the most affected areas in the war-torn city. China also turned over US\$3 million worth of heavy equipment (dump trucks, cement, and mixers, excavators and bulldozers) to be used in the recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation activities in Marawi City. Chinese and Filipino firms even formed a consortium for the Marawi Rehabilitation Project.

Counterterrorism cooperation was one of the major reasons for the revival of the ADST of the two countries that went dormant during the administration of President Benigno Aquino III. On December 15, 2017, the Philippines and China resumed the ADST after holding its last meeting in 2013. As stated earlier, the Philippines and China inaugurated the ADST in 2005 during the administration of President Arroyo.

Recent agenda of ADST under President Duterte centered on defense and security cooperation in addressing non-traditional security challenges, such as terrorism and violent extremism, as well as man-made and natural disasters. Discussions also covered cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response and cooperation in the maritime domain, especially in the South China Sea. Both countries also agreed to bolster cooperation in the area of military training and education, particularly those units involved in counterterrorism.

## Challenges in Counterterrorism Cooperation

Some concomitant challenges are affecting effective counterterrorism cooperation between the Philippines and China. These challenges emanate from different threat perceptions and security outlooks, ideological and legal orientations of counterterrorism policies, as well as institutional and bureaucratic arrangements for counterterrorism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Portions of this section are culled from Banlaoi, Rommel. "Counterterrorism Cooperation Between China and Southeast Asian Countries: Current Status, Challenges and Future Directions." Paper prepared for the workshop on "China-ASEAN Non-Traditional Security Cooperation: Progress, Problems, and Prospect," organized by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Singapore and held on April 26, 2019.



## Threat perceptions and security outlooks

Though China and the Philippines agree to cooperate to combat terrorism, serious gaps in their respective threat perceptions and security outlooks impede effective international cooperation. China's view of the terrorist threat is always directed at Uyghur militants and is even viewed largely as a domestic security problem. China associates terrorism with Uyghur separatism that requires a solid domestic response.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government regards Uyghur separatism as one of the country's most serious domestic security problems requiring a very strong law enforcement action. The Communist Party of China even describes Xinjiang as the main battleground of its war against terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

China's counterterrorism laws are directed at Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang, particularly the one initiated by the ETIM.<sup>13</sup> China regards ETIM to be responsible for much of the terrorist attacks in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).<sup>14</sup> Being a purely domestic threat, China does not allow other countries to interfere. China's counterterrorism outlook is strongly anchored on the principle of non-interference. Thus, its counterterrorism cooperation approach aims to promote coordination and concerted action and not joint or combined operation with other countries.

The Philippines has its threat perception and security outlook on terrorism. In countering terrorism, the Philippines upholds the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. Compared with China, the Philippines upholds the security outlook of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) viewing terrorism not only as a domestic security problem but also as "a profound threat to international peace and security and a direct challenge to the attainment of peace, progress, and prosperity for ASEAN."<sup>15</sup>

Thus, ASEAN stresses the need "to improve regional cooperation on counterterrorism" by undertaking "effective measures through deepening

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<sup>11</sup> Tunner, Murray Scot, and Bellacqua, James. (2016). *China's Response to Terrorism*. Arlington, VA: CAN Analysis and Solutions.

<sup>12</sup> Tunner, Murray Scot, and Bellacqua, James. (2016). *China's Response to Terrorism*, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> "Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China." (2015). Beijing: National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China.

<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Counterterrorism. (2018). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*. Washington DC: United States Department of State Publication, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> ASEAN Convention on Counterterrorism. January 13, 2007.



cooperation among ASEAN law enforcement agencies and relevant authorities in countering terrorism.”<sup>16</sup> The Philippines is therefore open to joint military actions and combined law enforcement operations with other ASEAN countries in countering terrorism in Southeast Asia.

## Ideological and legal orientations for counterterrorism

Different ideological and legal orientations for counterterrorism limit meaningful cooperation between China and the Philippines. China’s communist ideology frames the problem of terrorism different from its Southeast Asian counterparts. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been telling the Chinese people and the international community that it is waging its own “war on terrorism” that is focused on countering Uyghur separatism and extremism.<sup>17</sup> This involves the restriction of religious practices that is undesirable in Southeast Asia. China pursues counterterrorism cooperation with ASEAN and AMS because of CPP’s Uyghur problem.

Communist ideology also creates a legal system that is uncommon in present-day Southeast Asia, except in Vietnam. Most Southeast Asian countries are undergoing a democratization process that is different from China. This democratization process, though admittedly not a uniform occurrence in the region, has created a regional legal regime for counterterrorism that is now enshrined in the 2007 ASEAN Convention on Counterterrorism. China has its counterterrorism law that is harsh as it tightens political and social control of Muslim Uyghurs as a preventive measure against terrorism.<sup>18</sup> This draconian measure is something that is discouraged by ASEAN.

As a result, China’s counterterrorism cooperation with the Philippines and other ASEAN countries is currently limited more on the sharing of state practices and domestic accomplishments. Because China and the Philippines are paying attention to their respective domestic sensitivities, no new cooperation is taking place on counterterrorism other than

<sup>16</sup> ASEAN Convention on Counterterrorism. January 13, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> “China’s War on Terrorism and the Xinjiang Emergency.” Washington DC: Hudson Institute. September 5, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, Dawn. (2017). “China’s Approach to International Terrorism.” United States Institute of Peace Peace Brief, no. 235, p. 3.





those already existing under the law enforcement cooperation against transnational crimes, especially under the mandate of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL).

### **Institutional and bureaucratic arrangements for counterterrorism**

China and the Philippines have their unique organization for counterterrorism. Institutions in charge of counterterrorism in China and the Philippines are varied. Their bureaucracies for counterterrorism are arranged according to their respective domestic political structures, needs, and outlook.

In China, many government institutions like law enforcement, intelligence, paramilitary, military, and non-traditional security organs have overlapping roles in counterterrorism.<sup>19</sup> But President Xi Jinping controls all these institutions as the Chairman of the powerful National Security Commission (NSC).<sup>20</sup> When it comes to internal security and combating domestic terrorism, Xi tends to micromanage the country. During his first meeting at the NSC on 15 April 2014, Xi strongly declared to “build a national security system which is centralized, integrated, highly efficient, and authoritative, to improve leadership over the work of national security.”<sup>21</sup>

In 2015, China released its National Security Law mandating the adoption of a National Security Strategy with strong provisions on counterterrorism. Based on its National Security Strategy, China also adopts a counterterrorism law in 2015 that incorporates the country’s National Counter Terrorism Strategy into the National Security Strategy.

Apparently, is the super organ of the Chinese government in charge of the overall counterterrorism decision making. But the implementation of China’s counterterrorism sremains under the National Counterterrorism Leading Small Group (NCTLSG), a national-level inter-agency organization for counterterrorism created immediately after 9/11.<sup>22</sup> The NCTLSG

<sup>19</sup>Turner and Bellacqua. *China’s Response to Terrorism*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup>Turner and Bellacqua. *China’s Response to Terrorism*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup>Xi Jinping. Speech delivered at the First Meeting of the National Security Commission, April 15, 2014.

<sup>22</sup>Turner and Bellacqua. *China’s Response to Terrorism*, p. 59.



is composed of at least 16 ministries led by the following ministries as highly influential statutory members: Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of State Security, People's Armed Police, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The NSTLSG also provides seats to the following ministries and government agencies: Ministry of Finance, State Religious Affairs Bureau, Border Management Bureau (under joint PLA/MPS leadership), Customs General Administration, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Civil Affairs, and Ministry of Public Health.<sup>23</sup> But on top of these ministries and agencies is the NSC.

The Philippines has the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) as the main inter-agency body of the national government in charge of policy-making for counterterrorism that is chaired by a civilian Executive Secretary who directly reports to the President. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) have their counterterrorism units and Special Forces for counterterrorism operations. The AFP and PNP have "joint campaign plans" for counterterrorism operations.

## Conclusion

Despite their continuing territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the Philippines and China decide to cooperate in countering terrorism because of their mutual security interests in this field. Both countries share common security threats from international terrorism that both countries desire to surmount. The principles of reciprocity and reputation motivate both countries to pursue and sustain counterterrorism cooperation.

Since the liberation of Marawi, the Philippines and China have been implementing various projects on counterterrorism. Both countries law enforcement authorities are collaborating in the area of information exchange and capacity building. China is currently assisting the Philippines in the rehabilitation of Marawi.

However, there are still challenges in counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries. But sustaining their friendship and enhancing their cooperation will enable both countries to overcome these challenges.

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<sup>23</sup> Tunner and Bellacqua. *China's Response to Terrorism*, p. 59.

