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Comparing State Responses in Addressing Violent Extremism, Terrorism, and Muslim Separatism in the Philippines and China: Towards Counterterrorism Cooperation*

Introduction

Though the Philippines and China still have enormous differences on conflicting sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, they, however, share common security challenges that can strongly encourage bilateral cooperation rather than conflict. Non-traditional security issues of maritime piracy, illicit trafficking (of arms, drugs, human), terrorism, environmental degradation, disaster management, economic development, poverty alleviation and food security, among others, are areas of common interests where both countries can cooperate for mutual benefits.¹ Specifically, the Philippines and China face common security problems emanating from violent extremism and terrorism where both countries can learn from each other's exemplary practices in armed conflict management, peace promotion, and nation building.

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¹ For more discussions, see Banlaoi, Rommel C. "Combatting Transnational Crimes and Illicit Activities in the South China Sea: Current Situation and Proposal for the Implementation of the DOC." Paper presented at the international conference on "Implementing the DOC and Cooperation Mechanism in the South China," organized by the National Institute of South China Sea Studies (NISCSS), in Haikou, Hainan, China on August 14-15, 2014.





This paper aims to describe the problem of violent extremism and terrorism emanating from Muslim separatism in the Philippines and China. It compares the responses of their respective governments to address the interrelated problems of violent extremism, terrorism, and Muslim separatism. It analyzes the strengths and limitations of these responses for conflict management, peace promotion and nation building. It argues that comparing state responses on the subject is significant in raising the awareness of Chinese and Filipinos (especially ethnic Chinese as Filipinos) who are interested to see the improvement of the bilateral relationship of these two countries for economic, political, social, and cultural reasons. Raising awareness of Filipinos and Chinese on this issue can improve people-to-people contact and encourage friendly exchanges among their academics, public officials, businesspersons, and even ordinary citizens towards counterterrorism cooperation.

Challenges of Violent Extremism, Terrorism, and Muslim Separatism in the Philippines and China

Violent extremism, terrorism, and Muslim separatism are contested concepts in the academe. Policy makers, journalists and ordinary persons used these three concepts ambiguously, if not confusingly. According to the United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Violent Extremism, “violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use ideologically-motivated violence to activate radical, ideological, religious, or political views.”² This view, however, remains problematic conceptually and operationally. Simply put, violent extremism is an intolerant faith, belief, ideology or worldview that endorses and glorifies the use of violence against others not sharing that faith, belief, ideology or worldview.³ At present, violent extremism is associated with terrorism where there is also no commonly acceptable definition. But the United Nations describes

² United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism. “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.” Retrieved on June 11, 2019 from <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism>.

³ Banlaoi, Rommel C. “Updates on Violent Extremism in the Philippines.” Lecture delivered at a public forum on “Violent Extremism” held at Miriam College on March 11, 2019.





terrorism as “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.”⁴

This paper argues that violent extremism provides justification for various acts of terrorism. Some Muslim separatist groups worldwide commit acts of terrorism as part of their violent struggle. Challenges of violent extremism and threats of international terrorism emanating from Muslim separatist groups can be traced from the end of the Cold War in the 1990s during the global and regional trends in Islamic resurgence.⁵ From the bipolar power politics of the Cold War, the post-Cold War era hastened the return of ethnic nationalism and the revival of identity politics in the study of internal armed conflicts and inter-state relations.⁶ Ethnic nationalism and identity politics are some of the drivers of Muslim separatism in the Philippines and China.

The “Balkanization” of Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War also inspired separatist aspirations of some Muslim nationalists around the world. The rise of transnational Islam after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States also heightened the Islamic consciousness of many Muslims in Africa, Asia, and Europe and encouraged Muslim activists to pursue their struggle for freedom, independence, and self-determination.⁷ These wide arrays of issues resulted in the rise of violent extremism in the 21st century associated with Muslim separatism.

Being hosts to a minority of Muslim population with a feeling of economic marginalization and political exclusion, the Philippines and China were not immune from the unintended security consequences of Islamic resurgence in the Muslim world. The Muslims in the Philippines represent five percent

⁴ For more discussions, see United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism. “Key Documents/ Activities.” Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/index.shtml>

⁵ Sadain, Mehol K. (1994). *Global and Regional Trends in Islamic Resurgence: Their Implications on the Southern Philippines*. Pasay City: Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute.

⁶ For more discussions on identity politics and separatist violence, see Banlaoi, Rommel C. (2012). *Bangsamoroism and the Nexus of Identity Politics and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines*. Cotabato City: Institute for Autonomy and Governance Policy Brief.

⁷ See Banlaoi, Rommel. (2009). “Transnational Islam in the Philippines.” In Peter Mandaville, et. al. (Eds). *Transnational Islam in South and Southeast Asia: Movements, Networks, and Conflict Dynamics*. Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, pp. 167-188.





or 4 million of the country's total population.⁸ The Muslims in China, on the other hand, represent 1.5 percent or 20 million of the country's total population.⁹ Though not all Muslims in these two countries have separatist orientation, the Philippines and China share the same problem on how to address politically organized groups of Muslims aspiring for self-determination through greater autonomy or a separate statehood.

Muslims in the Philippines identify themselves as Moros. Though Moros are found all over the country, they are concentrated largely in Mindanao, particularly in the conflict-affected provinces of Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Sur. Outside of the Philippines, some Moro communities are found in Sabah, which at present is under the contested control of Malaysia, and in Brunei and Indonesia.

The Philippine government describes Muslims in the Philippines as Muslim Filipinos. But radical and ethno-nationalist Muslims in the Philippines prefer to call themselves as Moros and not Filipinos.¹⁰ Only a few Muslims in the Philippines are separatists in orientation. Most of those who have acquired a separatist stand are associated originally with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and eventually with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MNLF abandoned its separatist position when it entered into peace talks with the Philippine government leading to the signing of the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 and the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) in 1996.

The MILF also left behind its separatist cause when it also entered peace talks with the Philippine government leading to the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014 and the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2018. However, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansar Khalifa Philippines (AKP), and now defunct Maute Group still pursue a separatist position in order to establish an Islamic state.¹¹ These groups, particularly the ASG, used to be aligned with Al-Qaeda. But

⁸ The World Bank. (2003). *Social Assessment of Conflict-Affected Areas in Mindanao*. Manila: The World Bank Philippines Post Conflict Series No. 1, pp. 9-10.

⁹ See McKinney, Evan W. (2006). *China's Muslims: Separatism and Prospects for Ethnic Peace*. MA Thesis, Naval Post-Graduate School, Monterey, California.

¹⁰ For a seminal work on this concept, see Asana, Abdurasad. *Moros Not Filipinos*. Marawi City: Bangsamoro Research Center, nd.

¹¹ Banlaoi, Rommel C. (2012). "Bangsamoroism and the Nexus of Identity Politics and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines." *Institute for Autonomy and Governance Policy Brief*.





since 2014, all these groups have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Most Muslim Filipinos have been integrated into the mainstream Philippine society. Some of their political leaders have even entered mainstream Philippine politics. But the intermittent violent activities of Moro separatists in the southern Philippines continue to threaten peace and order in the country. In its *Country Reports on Terrorism* published in September 2018, the US Department of State claims that the Philippines remains as a “terrorist safe haven” because of the violent activities of Moro separatist groups. Complicating this dreadful situation is the depressing reality that these Moro separatist groups not only have tactical alliances with each other but they also have some “violent entrepreneurial relations” with some corrupt elected local officials and with a few misfits in the police and the military sectors.¹²

In China, most Muslims call themselves as Uyghurs. They are Turkic people who live mainly in Xinjiang province. Other Uyghurs are found in Gansu and Ningxia provinces.¹³ A small number of Uyghurs also stays in Hunan province, particularly in Taoyuan County. Outside of China, communities of Uyghurs are found in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and small communities live in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey. Muslim separatists come largely from the Uyghur communities in Xinjiang and they are associated with the following militant groups: East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), East Turkestan Liberation Organization (ETLO), Eastern Turkestan Independence Organization (ETIO), Uyghur Liberation Organization (ULO), Eastern Turkestan Liberation Front (ETLF), Free Turkestan Movement (FTM), and the United National Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (UNRF).¹⁴

Though some Uyghurs argue that they are being alienated from the mainstream Chinese society, China’s Uyghur separatists are very small in number, poorly equipped, loosely linked, and vastly outgunned by the

¹² For an excellent study on this topic, see Lara, Francisco Jr., and Schoofs, Steven. (Eds). (2013). *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. London: International Alert.

¹³ See Starr, S. Fredrick. (Ed). (2004). *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*. New York: Central-Asia Caucus Institute.

¹⁴ For more references, see Millward, James. (2004). *Violent Separatism in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment*. Washington D.C.: East-West Center; Dwyer, Arienne M. (2008). *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*. Washington: East-West Center; and Davis, Elizabeth Van Wie. (2008). “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China.” Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.





Chinese police and the military.¹⁵ But their violent activities continue to cause security and public safety problems for the Chinese government. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government blamed Uyghur separatists for perpetrating most of the bombing incidents in China.

Not all Muslims in China are Uyghurs. There are ethnic Chinese Muslims who call themselves as Hui.¹⁶ Most Hui communities are found in Ningxia. They have no separatist inclination. They are, in fact, closely assimilated into the mainstream Chinese society. The ethno-genesis of Islamic consciousness and identity of the Uyghurs of China and the Moros of the Philippines predate the rise of statehood in both countries. Uyghurs and Moros have already existed before the birth of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines, respectively.

Moros and the Uyghurs who are separatists in orientation believe that they have distinct national identities already formed prior to formation of the Philippines and Chinese states. They stress that they used to enjoy independence until they were colonized, dominated, and controlled by the Christian government (in the case of the Philippines) and the Han government (in the case of China).

Prior to colonization, the Moro historical narrative stresses that Moros used to enjoy their freedom under two major sultanates that blossomed in the 17th century: the Sultanate of Sulu and the Sultanate of Maguindanao. These two sultanates resisted Spanish, American, and Japanese colonialism until they were forcibly incorporated into the Philippine Republic in 1946.¹⁷

In their own historical narrative, the Uyghurs, on the other hand, claimed that they used to live independently under the Islamic Uyghur Kingdom of East Turkestan. The Uyghur Kingdom flourished from the ninth century until the Manchu empire invaded the nation in 1876.¹⁸ The growth of Uyghur nationalism began in the 1920s through the writings of Uyghur nationalists and intellectuals.¹⁹

¹⁵ Rubin, Barry. (2009). *Guide to Islamist Movements*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

¹⁶ Dillon, Michael. *China's Muslim Hui Community*. (1999). Surrey: Curzon Press.

¹⁷ Majul, Cesar. (1999). *Muslims in the Philippines*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

¹⁸ C. Mackerras, C. "Xinjiang at the Turn of the Century: The Causes of Separatism." *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 289-303.

¹⁹ Bhattacharya, Abanti. (2003). "Conceptualising Uyghur Separatism in Chinese Nationalism." *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 361.





State Responses in Countering Violent Exteremism and Muslim Separatism in the Philippines and China

To address the problem of Muslim separatism, the Philippines and China employ various approaches to manage domestic conflicts, maintain internal peace, and promote national unity. Because of specific characteristics of their historical experiences and the particular feature of their current domestic political systems, the two countries developed different tactical and operational measures on how to solve the problem which, ironically, are anchored on a similar strategic objective to integrate their Muslim communities into their mainstream society under a single state.

The Philippine Response

The Philippine government has been promoting the policy of integration and assimilation to answer the Moro Question.²⁰ Towards this end, the Philippine government implements some affirmative actions to solve the underlying conditions of Moro separatism. It even originally created the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to accommodate the political aspiration of Muslims in the Philippines for self-determination.

The ARMM does not represent the whole of Mindanao with 26 provinces. It is composed of only five provinces in Basilan (except Isabela City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao (except Cotabato City), Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Other provinces of Mindanao are outside the administrative jurisdiction of the ARMM. It has more than 4 million population, 90 percent of which are Muslims. The head of the ARMM is called governor and is directly elected by the people in the ARMM areas. However, there were criticisms that there was no “genuine autonomy” in the ARMM because it was still heavily controlled by the Central Government, particularly in the appropriation of government funding.²¹ Thus, Moro rebels associated with the MILF rejected the ARMM.

²⁰ For a good read on this topic, see Turner, Mark, May, R.J., and Turner, Lulu Respall. (Eds). (1992). *Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers. Also see Tuazon, Bobby. (Ed). (2008). *The Moro Reader: History and Contemporary Struggles of the Bangsamoro People*. Quezon City: Center for People Empowerment in Governance.

²¹ Bacani, Benedicto R. (2004). *Beyond Paper Autonomy: The Challenge in Southern Philippines*. Makati City and Cotabato City: Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Center for Autonomy and Governance.





The MILF, a splinter group of the MNLF, wants to replace the ARMM with a new political entity called the Bangsamoro with a ministerial form of government. On October 15, 2012, the Philippine government and the MILF signed the Framework of Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) to provide a roadmap for the creation of a Bangsamoro Government that will replace the ARMM upon the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement.²²

During the administration of then President Ferdinand E. Marcos, the government pursued a hard measure by implementing an all out war policy against the Moro rebels. President Corazon Aquino initiated peace talks with the Moro rebels until the FPA with the MNLF was signed in 1996 under President Fidel V. Ramos. In fact, President Ramos provided the Philippine government's overall framework for the promotion of peace talks with the Moro rebels. He created the National Unification Commission (NUC) in 1992, which formulated the Six Paths to Peace in 1993. Until now, the Six Paths to Peace informs the National Peace Plan of the national government being currently implemented by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process.

The Six Paths to Peace aim to accomplish the following peace initiatives:

1. **The pursuit of social, economic, and political reforms that address the root causes of the armed conflicts.** The recommendations include a set of "immediate doable" which are governmental actions that set the direction and push the necessary reform to address the identified root causes. The most commonly expressed root causes in the NUC consultations were:

- a. Massive and abject poverty and economic inequity, particularly in the distribution of wealth and control over the resource base for livelihood;
- b. Poor governance (including lack of basic social services, absenteeism of elected local officials, corruption, and inefficiency in government bureaucracy) and poor implementation of laws (including those that should protect the environment);
- c. Injustice, abuse of those in authority and power, violations of human rights, and inequity, corruption and delays in the administration of justice;
- d. Structural inequities in the political system, including control by an elite minority, traditional politicians and political dynasties, and enforcement of such control through private armies; and

²² For a copy of the framework of agreement, see "The 2012 Framework of Agreement on the Bangsamoro." Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ph/the-2012-framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro/>.





- e. Exploitation and marginalization of indigenous cultural communities, including lack of respect and recognition of ancestral domain and indigenous legal and political systems. Serious concerns were also expressed about, among others, the destruction for the natural environment, the conduct of counterinsurgency campaign, and the continuing hardships experienced by communities in the midst of armed conflict.

2. **Building consensus and empowerment for peace.** This path includes people's participation in the peace process and continued consultations for constructive exchange between government and local communities, especially on issue with direct impact on the life of the community.

3. **Pursuit of a peaceful negotiated settlement with the different armed rebel groups.** This path involves continued and vigorous efforts to conduct exploratory talks (these have not yet been initiated or completed), hold formal peace negotiations, and achieve a final negotiated peace settlement with each of the armed rebel groups.

4. **Establishment of programs for honorable reconciliation and reintegration into mainstream society.** This includes amnesty to respond to concerns for legal status and security and a program of community-based economic assistance for former rebels. The proposed amnesty program presents twin measures – one for the rebels from all armed groups, and the other, applicable to agents of the state charged with specific crimes in the course of counter-insurgency operations.

5. **Addressing concerns that arise out of the continuing armed hostilities.** To ensure maximum protection and welfare of non-combatants in the midst of the fighting four activities were proposed along this path:

- a. Local suspension of offensive military operations for a fixed period;
- b. Increasing the effectiveness of legal protection of non-combatants, through a multi-track dissemination and information campaign on laws and regulations for combat behavior and the protection of non-combatants in the midst of armed conflict, official review of compliance with these laws and regulations, and vigorous prosecution and punishment of those found guilty of violation;
- c. Intensified delivery of basic services to conflict areas by civilian government; and,
- d. Respect and recognition of “peace zones” as agreed upon by the concerned sectors of the community.

6. **Nurturing a positive climate for peace.** This includes confidence-building measures between government and the armed groups, and peace





advocacy and education within the rest of society. Finally, as recommended by the National Unification Commission (NUC), President [Fidel] Ramos has created the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, which shall be fully dedicated to the pursuit of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace, and in managing the day-to-day needs of this comprehensive peace effort. The NUC shall cease to exist when this new Office shall be fully operational.

When President Joseph Estrada took power, he implemented an all out war against the MILF in 2000. But President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo continued the peace talks with the MILF in 2001 and this culminated in the initial signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) in 2008. But the Philippine Supreme Court declared the MOA-AD unconstitutional, which angered some radical commanders of the MILF.

In 2009, a new radical group separated from the MILF. Members of this new group call themselves as Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). When President Benigno S. Aquino III assumed office in 2010, he pursued peace talks with the MILF and declared an “all out justice” against the BIFF and other lawless elements of the MILF, including rouge factions of the MNLF and bandit members of the ASG.

As a result of the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF, a Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was signed on January 25, 2014. Both parties agreed to expand the geographic scope of the ARMM to include some municipalities in Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato. This “expanded ARMM” would be called the Bangsamoro Government pursuant to the FAB signed between the Philippine government and the MILF in October 2012.²³ On the basis of CAB, the Philippine Congress passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) on July 24, 2018 and was signed into law on July 26, 2018.

With the signing BOL, the MILF already relaxed its concept of self-determination. From separation, the MILF already accepted to be part of the Philippine Republic, but with its own independent government that is ministerial in form. As a result of the plebiscite held on January 29, 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was established under the Bangsamoro Government. The BARMM already replaced the ARMM. However, armed groups adhering to the ISIS continue to fight for a separate Islamic state in the southern Philippines. These pro-ISIS groups were responsible for the siege of Marawi City that

²³“The 2012 Framework of Agreement on the Bangsamoro.” (2012).





started on May 23, 2017 and ended on October 17, 2017.²⁴ The Philippine government refuses to seek peace talks with these pro-ISIS groups because of their alleged involvements in various acts of terrorism. The Philippine government upholds a policy of not talking with terrorist organizations.

The Chinese Response

The Chinese government also implements its own affirmative actions to address the Uyghur separatism.²⁵ It has an “open tolerance” policy, which aims to politically accommodate “national minorities,” including the Uyghurs, in building a “harmonious” Chinese society. It created the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) to give Uyghurs the political space to govern themselves in accordance with state policies.²⁶

The XUAR is located in northwest China. It covers around 1.66 million square km, which accounts almost 16 percent of the Chinese territory. It has 21 million populations, 60 percent of which are ethnic minorities. There are 47 ethnic groups in Xinjiang, mainly the Uyghur, Han, Kazak, Hui, Mongolian, Kirgiz, Xibe, Tajik, Uzbek, Manchu, Daur, Tatar, and Russian. The XUAR is headed by a chairman who is selected from the members of the Standing Committee of the National Peoples Congress (NPC). The XUAR is still strongly controlled by the Central Government. Thus, finding no real autonomy in XUAR, the Uyghur separatists demand for real independence by separating from China.²⁷

Though the Chinese government has an “open tolerance” policy with “Muslim minorities,” it, however, implements a hard approach through its “crackdown” and “strike-hard” campaigns against three evils of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Thus, the Chinese government does not initiate peace talks with the Uyghur separatists.²⁸ In its “strike-hard” campaign against Uyghur separatists, the Chinese government has accelerated arrests,

²⁴ For detailed discussions, see Banlaoi, Rommel C. (2018). “One Year After the Liberation of Marawi: Islamic State PH Still Alive.” *Vera Files*.

²⁵ Clarke, M. (2008). “China’s ‘War on Terror’ in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 271-301.

²⁶ B. Sautman, B. (1998). “Preferential policies for ethnic minorities in China: The case of Xinjiang.” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 86-118.

²⁷ Y. Shichor, Y. (2005). “Blow Up: Internal and External Challenges of Uyghur Separatism and Islamic Radicalism to Chinese Rule in Xinjiang.” *Asian Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 119-135.

²⁸ See Chinese government white paper entitled “History and Development of Xinjiang.” Retrieved from <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zfbps/t36561.htm>.





trials, and sentencing of individuals involved in “separatism, extremism, and terrorism. The Chinese government has even supported the “global war on terrorism” led by the US to justify its crackdown on Uyghur dissent, particularly those engaged in various acts of political violence and terrorism.²⁹ The Amnesty International, International Alert, and other human rights organizations have criticized the Chinese government for its hard measure against Uyghur separatists.

But the Chinese government asserts that it needs to pursue the full force of the law against separatists in order to maintain peace and order and to promote national unity. The Chinese Constitution declared secession as illegal. Thus, the Chinese government pursues a hard line measure against secessionist forces. In March 2013, for example, Chinese courts sentenced from five years to life in prison 20 Uyghur activists found guilty of militant separatism. Like the Philippine government, the Chinese government also pursued assimilated policies that aimed to submerge Uyghur identities into the Chinese “Han” identity. The Chinese government offered limited autonomy to its minority people, including the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Its concept of “regional autonomy” is being applied to Xinjiang, Xizang, Ningxia, Guangxi and Inner Mongolia.

In 2005, China’s State Council Information Office published the White Paper on “Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities” in China. This White Paper articulates the Chinese government overarching policy against separatist groups in China. It describes China as a “united multi-ethnic country” with 56 ethnic groups “identified and recognized by the central government.”³⁰

In order “to promote the common prosperity of all the ethnic groups” in China, the government promotes the following measures to prevent violent extremism associated with Muslim separatism:

1. Giving prominence to speeding up the development of ethnic autonomous areas. While formulating the national economic and social development plan, the central government gives full respect and consideration to the characteristics and needs of the ethnic autonomous areas, and gives strategic prominence to speeding up their development in accordance with the overall arrangement and general requirements of national development.

²⁹ Clarke, Michael. (2008). “China’s ‘War on Terror’ in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism.”

³⁰ White Paper on “Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China.” (2005). Retrieved from http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/ethnic_minorities_2005/ethnic.html.





2. Giving priority to and rationally arranging infrastructure projects in ethnic autonomous areas. When making arrangements for infrastructure construction and exploitation of resources in ethnic autonomous areas, the central government appropriately raises the proportion of investment and loans from policy banks, and grants the local areas reduction or exemption from supplementary funding according to their different conditions.

3. Strengthening financial support for ethnic autonomous areas. With the development of the national economy and the growth in financial revenue, governments at all levels have gradually increased transfer payments from the exchequer to ethnic autonomous areas. Through ordinary transfer payments from the exchequer, special-purpose transfer payments from the exchequer, transfer payments from the exchequer according to preferential policies regarding ethnic minorities, and other ways, the central government has increased the financial input in ethnic autonomous areas to promote their economic development and social progress, and gradually reduce the gap between them and the more developed areas.

4. Attaching importance to ecological construction and environmental protection in ethnic autonomous areas. All the four key areas and four key projects included in the National Ecological Environment Construction Plan of the Chinese government are in ethnic minority areas. The “Natural Forest Protection Project” and the projects for converting farming land for forestry and pasture are mostly in ethnic minority areas.

5. Adopting special measures to help ethnic autonomous areas develop education. The state helps ethnic autonomous areas universalize nine-year compulsory education and develop diverse forms of education. Ethnic autonomous areas are key target areas for the state’s plans to basically universalize nine-year compulsory education and basically eliminate illiteracy among the young and middle-aged population.

6. Strengthening assistance to impoverished ethnic minority areas. Since the mid-1980s, when the Chinese government launched its large-scale poverty-alleviation drive in an organized and programmed way, ethnic minorities and areas they live have always been key targets of governmental aid.

7. Increasing input into social services in ethnic autonomous areas. The state has increased input into health services in ethnic autonomous areas, to raise the level of medical care for the people of those areas. In 2003, the central government appropriated special funds totaling RMB1.37 billion for health services in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Ningxia, and Tibet autonomous regions, which covered such aspects as public health, basic rural





health facilities, specialized hospitals, rural cooperative medical services, and control of serious diseases.

8. Assisting ethnic autonomous areas to open wider to the outside world.

The state grants more decision-making power to production enterprises in ethnic autonomous areas in managing foreign trade, encourages them to export local products and implement preferential border trade policies. It encourages and supports the ethnic autonomous areas to give full play to their geographical and cultural advantages in expanding their opening to and cooperation with neighboring countries.

9. Pairing off more developed areas and ethnic autonomous areas for aid. The Chinese government encourages better-off areas and ethnic groups to help those that are not well off yet, and attain common prosperity this way. Since the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government has organized the more developed areas along the eastern coast to provide corresponding aid to western areas and help ethnic minority areas develop their economies and public services.

10. Giving care to special needs of ethnic minorities in production and living. Respecting the customs of ethnic minorities, and to meet their needs for special necessities in production and living, the state has adopted a special policy for their trade and production of necessities.³¹

To strengthen state response against violent extremism and separatism, China passed a new legislation in 2018 creating a “re-education camps” in Xinjiang. These camps aim to eliminate “religious extremism” and Muslim separatism in China. Though highly criticized by human rights groups all over the world, China maintains that these camps essential for domestic stability and national unity.

China’s current measures against terrorism are fully articulated in its most recent White Paper “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang,” published by the State Council Information Office in March 2019. This White Paper stresses candidly that terrorism “is the common enemy of humanity” requiring international cooperation to defeat it. It urges the need to prioritize “preventive counterterrorism approach” through deradicalization and international counterterrorism exchanges.³² The White Paper states that China “supports more

³¹ White Paper on “Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities in China.” (2005).

³² “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang.” (2019). Beijing: State Council Information Office.





pragmatic international cooperation in the fight against terrorism on the basis of mutual respect and consultation on an equal footing.”³³

Lessons Learned

Both the Philippines and China face the perennial problem of violent extremism, terrorism, and Muslim separatism. Though both countries have the same strategic objective to integrate Muslims in the mainstream society under a single state, their governments have adopted a different measure to counter Muslim separatism. The Philippines has emphasized soft approaches by pursuing peace talks with Muslim separatists while China has pursued harder approaches having criminalized acts of violent extremism and separatism. Though China also implements non-military measures to counter terrorist threats through rehabilitation and deradicalization programs, it adopts stricter approach compared to the Philippines. Their different approaches have something to do with their understanding of the problem and the domestic context of the terrorist threats they face.

For the Philippines, there is now recognition that the status quo is unacceptable. The Philippine government recognizes the right of Muslims in Mindanao to protect their identity and enjoy their right to self-determination. Thus, it recognizes the need for the creation of a separate government for the Bangsamoro under a single Philippine Republic. For China, however, there is a need to preserve the status quo as it regards Xinjiang as “an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation.”³⁴ The Chinese government regards Muslim separatists as a threat to the unity of the Chinese nation and to the integrity of the Chinese territory. In fact, the Chinese government considers Xinjiang as part of its “core interests” that should be defended and should not be negotiated. Thus, the Chinese government offers no room for peace talks with Muslim separatists. The Chinese government even declares Muslim separatists as terrorists. In its White Paper, the Chinese government underscores:

Some “East Turkistan” organizations openly stated that they would use terrorist and violent means to achieve their purpose of separation.

³³ “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang.” (2019).

³⁴ 2003. “History and Development of Xinjiang.” *China Defense White Paper on Xinjiang*, Part 1. Retrieved from <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zfbps/t36561.htm>.





The “East Turkistan” forces in China’s Xinjiang and relevant countries plotted and organized a number of bloody incidents of terror and violence, including explosions, assassinations, arsons, poisonings, and assaults, seriously jeopardizing the lives, property and security of the Chinese people of various ethnic groups, and social stability in Xinjiang, and posing a threat to the security and stability of the countries and regions concerned.³⁵

Conclusion

The Philippines and China have common experiences in facing threats emanating from violent extremism and Muslim separatism. But they have differences on how to counter these threats. The Philippines is pursuing a softer and more comprehensive approach that privileges political negotiations to address Muslim separatism in the southern Philippines. China is practicing a harder and stricter law enforcement approach in countering Muslim separatism in the province of Xinjiang.

Because of their common experiences, albeit different approaches, in countering Muslim separatism, the Philippines and China can learn some lessons from each other’s practices. Exchanging views on their respective domestic practices can provide channels of communication that are essential to promote cooperation rather than competition in Philippines-China relations. Preventing and countering violent extremism associated with Muslim separatism is an area where the Philippines and China can pursue bilateral cooperation for mutual benefits.

³⁵ 2003. “History and Development of Xinjiang.”

