

## SOUTHEAST ASIA BULLETIN



## CSIS SOUTHEAST ASIA INITIATIVE

The CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative is a project of the International Security Program, Asia Division. CSIS launched the initiative in January 2008 to provide a venue for greater focus, examination, and analysis of Southeast Asian affairs within Washington's policy community. The initiative includes regular roundtables, conferences, studies, and forums to spotlight developments in the region. CSIS will also seek to partner with other interested organizations and individuals within and outside Washington to maximize the flow of information, analysis, and outreach on Southeast Asian affairs in the United States.

An important component of the initiative is the monthly *Southeast Asia Bulletin*, which provides a timely overview of key developments, events, and facts about the region and offers a forum for short essays by official and unofficial commentators on regional affairs.

Derek Mitchell, director, Southeast Asia Initiative, and Brian Harding, research associate, welcome your feedback on the *Southeast Asia Bulletin* at [dmitchell@csis.org](mailto:dmitchell@csis.org) and [bharding@csis.org](mailto:bharding@csis.org) respectively.

## Feature Article

THE LONG WARS OF THE ARMED FORCES  
OF THE PHILIPPINESRenato Cruz De Castro<sup>1</sup>

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In the last four decades, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has fought a series of extended, low-intensity, counterinsurgency conflicts. What factors account for the AFP's continuing involvement in these types of conflicts? And what are the prospects for the AFP to terminate its never-ending engagement in them?

## A Brief History

During the 1970s, the Philippines experienced two separate and enduring insurgencies that cyclically flared and abated. Together, they led to the deaths of more than 50,000 Filipinos. On Luzon and several other islands, the Communist Party-led National Democratic Front and its armed group, the New People's Army (NPA), mounted a major rebellion that involved hit-and-run tactics, bombings, and assassinations. Simultaneously, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) waged an ethno/religious insurgency in the southern island of Mindanao to gain autonomy or independence for the island.

By the early 1990s, both conflicts had largely petered out. In the late 1990s, however, a more militant and religiously oriented secessionist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a breakaway faction of the MNLF with a more pronounced Islamic orientation, began mobilizing its forces for the creation of Muslim Mindanao, an entity to be separate from the predominantly Christian Philippine state. In 1996, the government signed a peace agreement with the MNLF that formally ended the 25-year armed struggle, but heavy fighting soon broke out between the AFP and the MILF. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the consequent U.S.-led war on terror, the Philippine government accused the MILF of collaborating with Southeast Asian transnational terrorist groups Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf. The MILF leadership denied the allegations and entered formal peace talks with the Philippine government.

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Meanwhile, Abu Sayyaf staged several hostage seizures in Mindanao in the late 1990s. Abu Sayyaf's religious agenda was far more radical than the MILF's, calling for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Shari'a. The group launched a series of bombings, murders, kidnappings for ransom, massacres, and extortions. It was also able to forge links with international terrorist networks, which prompted the Philippine state to devote enormous resources to combat it.

### **Are Military Means Enough?**

Fighting the long wars in which the AFP has been engaged is an incremental and gradual process of attrition that involves huge costs in time, attention, resources, and human lives. It principally involves convincing the insurgent groups' key decisionmakers that their revolutionary and secessionist goals are unachievable or too costly. The Philippine military can only defeat these groups if it can put intense and unremitting pressure on their leaderships to force them to negotiate or capitulate. This is independent of military success or failure at the tactical level, however. The most intense political pressure a state can apply against any insurgent group is not the use of force but its ability to remove the underlying socioeconomic causes of discontent that continually give life to insurgencies. The state must mitigate popularly held grievances that foster a potent source for insurgent recruitments. An effective counterinsurgency strategy eliminates not the insurgents themselves but the conditions that allow these guerrilla forces to operate and strive.

The military, as a representative of the state, therefore must prove to the people that it is morally and politically superior to the guerrillas, responsive to the basic needs of its people, and quick to address the sources of disgruntlement and discontent that have fueled the insurgency in the first place. However, addressing these grievances is difficult in the Philippine case because the nature of the insurgency is extremely complex: while the weakened but still viable communist movement is fostered by socioeconomic inequality and economic underdevelopment, the Muslim secessionist movements are driven by dispossession of their ancestral lands and misguided state policy toward national minorities. The two movements thus have different political goals: the communist movement seeks to overthrow the government, whereas the Muslim secessionist groups aim merely to replace the state in Mindanao or seek autonomy within it.

In the end, the low-intensity conflicts in the Philippines are symptoms of deep socioeconomic problems and are not themselves the main cause of instability and insecurity in these areas. A highly militarized counterinsurgency approach will only aggravate the insurgencies or will make them appear in different forms, because the real causes are relative poverty, limited economic development, and sociopolitical cleavages.

## JANUARY TIMELINE OF EVENTS

**January 9, 2009:** Vietnam's Foreign Ministry expresses concern over China's announced policy to develop and use uninhabited islands in the Paracel and Spratley groups. This tension comes a month after the two countries settled a long-standing land border dispute, which left their maritime boundary dispute unsettled.

**January 10, 2009:** Thailand's Democrat Party-led ruling coalition wins 20 of 29 seats in by-elections, further securing its position after taking power by a slight margin in December. The results were a vote of confidence in Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and indicated that the Thai public seeks political stability following months of turmoil. Abhisit's coalition now controls 255 of 480 seats in parliament.

**January 12, 2009:** Indonesia and Australia sign a defense agreement to bolster their landmark **2006 Lombok Treaty**. The deal calls for increased partnership in counterterrorism, maritime security, intelligence sharing, peacekeeping, and disaster relief. It also stipulates more joint exercises and the creation of a joint steering committee to settle border disputes.

**January 13, 2009:** Amnesty International issues a report accusing Thailand of engaging in systematic torture in its efforts to quell the insurgency in the south of the country. Prime Minister Abhisit does not deny that abuses may have occurred in individual cases but counters that "it's not government policy and it was not carried out systematically." He also expresses doubt over the report's conclusions and said that his government will investigate whether extrajudicial killings have occurred.

**January 13, 2009:** Trials begin for 10 suspected members of the terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah who are accused of killing a Christian schoolteacher in June 2007 and plotting to bomb a cafe in Northern Sumatra (Indonesia). Motions questioning jurisdiction in the case, and the applicability of criminal versus terrorism laws, delay progress for the remainder of the month. Convictions under terrorism laws would bring harsher sentences.

**January 15, 2009:** Abu Sayyaf gunmen kidnap three International Committee of the Red Cross aid workers in the southern Philippines. At month's end, the hostages had not been freed and the kidnappers had demanded the end of military action in Sulu province. Abu Sayyaf has a long history of kidnappings, with many done to extort funds, but others conducted for political reasons (see featured essay above).

**January 17, 2009:** Malaysia's opposition coalition, led by Anwar Ibrahim, gains ground when the Islamist Parti Islam (PAS) wins a by-election in the Malaysia state of Terengganu. Observers see the victory as cementing the major gains made by the opposition in March 2008 national elections.

**January 20, 2009:** Thailand and Cambodia agree to settle their border dispute through existing bilateral mechanisms and not to bring the issue to the ASEAN summit in late February/early March. The announcement is followed by a mutual withdrawal of troops from the border area and an agreement to meet again in early February to begin border demarcation.

**January 22, 2009:** China announces that it will give Indonesia a remote sensing satellite to improve Indonesia's capacity to monitor its strategically vital waterways. Despite having vast maritime territory, Indonesia lacks the resources to monitor most of its waters.

**January 23, 2009:** Three men are sentenced to life in prison in the Philippines for their role in the bombing of a Manila train station in 2000. The men are members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The investigation and trial revealed the close connections between the MILF and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) before the MILF reportedly distanced itself from JI over the last few years.

**January 24, 2009:** Malaysia takes delivery of a diesel-powered Scorpène-class submarine, which is its first submarine. Purchased from France, the vessel is the first of at least two that will be purchased by the Malaysian Navy to bolster its maritime security capabilities. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore have small submarine fleets, with Indonesia and Singapore expecting further deliveries in coming years.

**January 30, 2009:** Thailand's opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), a coalition of supporters from the opposition Puea Thai Party and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, lodges a complaint with ASEAN, requesting that the multilateral body reexamine the legitimacy of Thailand's ruling government.

## EVENTS TO WATCH FOR IN FEBRUARY

**February 2–4:** Thailand and Cambodia will convene a joint border demarcation commission.

**February 4–17:** Cobra Gold, the largest military exercise in the Pacific, will take place in Thailand at a time when Thailand’s military is under fire for its handling of Rohingya migrants (see Major Regional Developments). The United States, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand will participate. Australia, China, France, Germany, Laos, Malaysia, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam will observe.

**February 18–19:** Hillary Clinton will visit Indonesia on her first trip as U.S. secretary of state. Her trip also includes Japan, South Korea, and China.

**February 17:** The UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunals will begin. The trials of five Khmer Rouge leaders will be the first judicial reckoning for Cambodia’s former regime.

**February 27–March 1:** The rescheduled 14th ASEAN summit will take place in Hua Hin, Thailand.

## U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

**January 15:** In the latest of a series of targeted sanctions required by the Tom Lantos Block Burmese Junta’s Anti-Democratic Efforts (JADE) Act of 2008, the United States Treasury Department freezes the assets of two Burmese businessmen, stating that their companies aid the governing military junta. A press release can be found [here](#).

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AT CSIS

The CSIS Southeast Asia Initiative hosted Ambassador Cameron Hume, U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, for a luncheon address entitled “A Strategic Partnership: U.S.-Indonesian Relations in the 21st Century.” An audio recording of the event can be found [here](#).

## MAJOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

### Rohingya Migrant Crisis Draws Global Attention to Thailand

Revelations of the Thai military’s brutal treatment of boatloads of Rohingya migrants, variably deemed refugees or economic migrants by different groups, sparked international outrage in January.

Each winter, thousands of ethnic Rohingya, a (largely) Muslim group based in western (largely Buddhist) Burma, arrive in Thailand en route to Malaysia, where they seek work and acceptance as Muslim practitioners. Almost 2 million Rohingya live in Burma, but they are not citizens, as the government refuses to acknowledge them as a nationality within the “Union of Myanmar.” Mainly confined to the western Burmese state of Arakan, they are unable to marry or travel without permission and cannot own land or property. Both the Burmese and Thai governments deny that the Rohingya face persecution in their home country, however. Thailand therefore maintains that Rohingya entering Thailand are economic migrants, not refugees. As home to an estimated 2 to 3 million illegal migrants and temporary workers from Burma, Thailand is extremely wary of further Burmese migration. Nevertheless, its porous sea border makes it difficult to prevent entry.

In mid-January, tourists reported seeing Thai military personnel beating Rohingya off the coast of Thailand’s Similan Islands, close to the Thailand-Burma border, prompting international media investigations. CNN obtained photos of hundreds of Rohingya refugees being towed out to sea and left to die of starvation and exposure on boats without engines. The accounts were corroborated by stories of survivors who landed on India’s Andaman Islands and Indonesia’s Aceh province.

The Thai government officially denies torturing or killing any Rohingya migrants, but some officials have privately claimed that the Rohingya, who are Muslim, were sent out to sea because it was feared that they would join the insurgency in southern Thailand. Thailand says that it will continue to deport these “economic migrants” but will provide their boats with food, water, and petrol, which it says it has always done. Thailand has also proposed regional talks with Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia to find a long-term solution to the problem.

## Weathering the Economic Storm

Southeast Asia has been hit hard by the recent economic crisis, but so far Singapore is the only economy to have officially gone into recession. In response, all major ASEAN economies—Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam—have announced stimulus packages. Singapore’s package is worth \$13.6 billion, the Philippines’ \$29.3 billion, Malaysia’s \$2 billion, Indonesia’s \$6.3 billion, Thailand’s \$12.5 billion, and Vietnam’s \$6 billion. All six of these countries’ central banks have also reacted to stem the crisis, with measures ranging from a 0.5 percent rate cut in the Philippines to a 3.0 percent cut in Vietnam. Singapore, which uses its dollar’s exchange rate as its preferred tool for monetary policy, moved to a policy of “zero percent appreciation” of its currency.

Despite the global situation, most regional economies are expected to continue to grow in 2009, albeit at a diminished pace. Unlike during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, most Southeast Asian countries now hold sizable stocks of foreign currency reserves, which are expected to help insulate them from the worst effects of the global downturn. Reliance on export markets, however, leaves many regional economies highly vulnerable to the effects of decreasing global consumption and possible trade protectionism as the global crisis continues, and potentially deepens, in the coming year.

So far, the economic measures taken by Southeast Asian governments to respond to changing economic conditions have been largely unilateral, although ASEAN has attempted to coordinate a response and facilitate agreements among its members and other states to contain the damage. Among its actions, ASEAN has organized a series of public seminars to discuss possible joint or coordinated approaches to the economic situation.

## MISCELLANEOUS FACTS ABOUT ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES (AFP)

- The Philippine Army’s 80,000 active duty soldiers are supplemented by more than 60,000 part-time paramilitary Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU), which provide local knowledge to the army but have been associated with human rights abuses in the past.
- The primary mission of the Philippines Air Force is internal security, with assets that predominantly include helicopter gunships and transport aircraft most useful for counterinsurgency missions.
- The Armed Forces of the Philippines has sent delegations to China to inspect Chinese military exports but has not yet purchased any military equipment from China.
- The Philippines has a total of 640 peacekeepers deployed to UN missions in Cote d’Ivoire, Haiti, Liberia, Sudan, and Timor-Leste.
- Since 9/11, U.S. military assistance to the Philippines has risen from virtually zero to become by far the largest account in East Asia and the Pacific. In FY2007, the Philippines received \$40 million of the region’s \$53 million in foreign military financing (FMF) and an estimated \$30 million of a total \$48 million in FY2008. It was also the largest recipient of international military education and training (IMET).

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