

Geopolitical Games and Malaysian Mediation in the Philippines

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This article assesses the complex strategic environment prevailing in East and Southeast Asia, where a “vacuum war” may be underway between China and the United States, with the southern Philippines as the bone of contention. The author argues that Malaysia is a keystone player in the peace process in Mindanao region of the Philippines and that it has a convergence of interests with the US. Malaysia’s involvement as a peace mediator between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic rebel movement is driven by Kuala Lumpur’s own territorial agenda and is not necessarily in alignment with the aims of the Philippines itself. The article delves into the various geopolitical calculations of major players in the Philippine conflict and demonstrates how peace-making diplomacy can open doors for strategic domination by great powers.

In January 2011, the peace negotiators for the Philippine government, and the peace negotiators for the largest Muslim separatist group in Mindanao, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), met for the first time under the new administration of President Benigno Aquino in Kuala Lumpur, with Malaysia as the Third-Country Facilitator of the peace talks.

The peace talks were stalled for months after the insistence of the Philippine government to replace the Malaysian chief facilitator who used to head the Malaysian secret service. Now, quiet diplomacy has apparently overcome this impasse that primarily arose between the Philippine government and

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the Malaysian government. But how that impasse was resolved has not yet been revealed. However, the Philippine government and the MILF had the recent “informal” meeting to set the formal resumption of peace talks in February.

Meanwhile, facts on the ground are unfolding. At the beginning of 2011, the European Union deployed two civilian humanitarian monitors to the ceasefire monitoring body for the peace talks, i.e. the International Monitoring Team (IMT) led by Malaysia that currently includes Japan, Brunei and Libya. Norway followed soon in deploying its peacekeepers in the IMT, and the Indonesians recently indicated that they will also send peacekeepers to the IMT after they were invited last year to participate in the effort.

In late 2010, Saudi Arabia joined in the peace process when it accepted the invitation from the negotiating parties to join the International Contact Group composed of Japan, Turkey and Great Britain. The floodgates of international scrutiny have opened up for the Philippines in its southern region of Mindanao.

The fact that regular armed encounters between the MILF and the Philippine military have been reduced to a minimum because of the ceasefire mechanism does not mean that the Moro insurgency in the Sulu archipelago and Central Mindanao has died down. The MILF is especially active in Central Mindanao, its main base of operations, and in the island province of Basilan in the Sulu archipelago, which is also the original base of operations of the Abu Sayyaf. According to Victor Taylor, a peace researcher, who has an extensive experience in the field in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, “The Abu Sayyaf [label] has been used very loosely by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) or the government on anyone considered an enemy. But you can say that as an organisation, *the Abu Sayyaf does not exist.*”¹

Taylor commented that his long experience in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao had taught him that blood ties are very strong among the Moros. Accordingly, the Moro people don’t think in terms of organisational labels, whether Moro National Liberation Front (or MNLF, the precursor of the MILF) or Abu Sayyaf or MILF since they are all mixed together, and “what is paramount to the people is that their common enemy is the

1 Alipala, J., “AFP as common foe unites Abu, MNLF, MILF in Sulu”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 12, 2007.

AFP.”² In short, Taylor insists that “What needs to be stressed is that from the perspective of the [Moro] fighters, the organisational labels that the government uses, such as ‘rogue MNLF-Abu Sayyaf,’ have no meaning. It’s the common enemy that binds them together.”³

Despite its Armed Non-State Actor status, the MILF’s skilful diplomacy has allowed it to sit at the negotiating table with diplomats from at least four powerful states – Japan, Turkey, Great Britain and lately Saudi Arabia, who are part of the International Contact Group for the Mindanao peace process that is acting as the principal guarantor in the event of a potential signed peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF and to see to its implementation and eventual compliance by both parties.

With the tacit blessings of the others, a seventh aspiring maritime regional power, Malaysia, has positioned itself to facilitate and perhaps mediate between the two sides, the Philippine government on one side, the MILF on the other, and watching avidly in the gallery are Japan, Turkey, Great Britain and Saudi Arabia.

What would compel such an extraordinary group of countries to be present at the negotiations for the resolution of a little understood armed conflict taking place in the far reaches and remote corners of maritime or island Southeast Asia? These countries are in the “catbird seat” to a “vacuum war” taking place between the current world hegemon, the United States, and Asia’s rising regional hegemon, China. In other words, the elephant in the room (in fact two elephants in the room) is the United States and China.

According to Grygiel’s thesis of “vacuum wars”, the power vacuums created by failed states (or failed regions such as Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago) attract the interests of great powers because they are an easy way to expand their spheres of influence while weakening their opponents or forestalling their intervention.⁴ A state that decides not to fill a power vacuum is effectively inviting other states to do so, thereby potentially decreasing its own relative power. Thus, the US military presence in the failing or failed region of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago ostensibly to assist the Philippine military in counter-terrorist operations against

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Grygiel, J, “Vacuum Wars, the Coming Competition Over Failed States”, *The American Interest*, July-August 2009.

the Abu Sayyaf is easily explained in light of Grygiel's thesis of "vacuum wars", since the US military presence precludes another great power, China, which is a maritime neighbour of the Philippines from filling the vacuum there.

In the case of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago in southern Philippines, China would be most interested to fill the "power vacuum" given the chance, since its location in the tri-border sea area is adjacent to its claimed "mare nostrum", i.e. the South China Sea. In fact, despite setbacks in its attempts to buy its way into favour with the Philippine government, which resulted in the cancellation of one major telecommunications deal three years ago due to a bribery scandal, China remains ready to help finance Philippine infrastructure projects with a \$1.8 billion fund, according to the Chinese ambassador.⁵ All indications are that China has not given up wooing the Philippine leadership to view it as its partner of choice in East Asia.

On the other hand, US presence in Mindanao has already been achieved through the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) based in Zamboanga City, with US contingents in other Philippine bases in the Sulu archipelago and the rest of Mindanao, particularly in the Muslim Moro-dominated areas. The US can probably live with the fact that they are not subject to attacks by the local Moro population or the Moro revolutionary fronts, the MILF and the MNLF (whose military activities are now confined to Sulu island alone) because their massive economic assistance to the Moro areas of Mindanao allows them free rein (or gives them the excuse) to go wherever they want.

The US presence in Mindanao completes a strategic encirclement of China in its periphery wherein "bringing up the rear to the forward bases in Taiwan, would neatly close the circle."⁶ No wonder that Chinese Navy strategists also appear to view the US presence in Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippine south as forming a "blockade" of China's legitimate maritime security interests.⁷

Mindanao is an arena of "claim-staking" by the US whose presence is justified by the "war on terror" or what is now known as the "long war." The "claim-staking" of the US in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago translates into a "vacuum war" between the US and China.

5 "China ready to help finance Philippine projects", *The China Post*, June 9, 2009.

6 Ahmad, A. "At the mouth of a volcano", *Frontline*, Volume 19, Issue 14, July 6-19, 2002.

7 Cole, B., "Chinese Naval Modernization and Energy Security", Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2006 Pacific Symposium, Washington, D.C., July 20, 2006.

By virtue of their seats in the International Contact Group for the Mindanao peace process, Japan, Turkey, Great Britain and Saudi Arabia are able to influence and subtly put pressure on the Philippines and entangle Malaysia in a diplomatic regional “Great Game” in maritime Southeast Asia. With an advantageous position (i.e. the catbird seat so to speak), they can triangulate (because of the “vacuum war” between the US and China in Mindanao) to curry favour or bargain or leverage with either China or the United States, depending on the current interests of their respective states, or potentially even collectively.⁸

Then there is the Malaysian role. The pundits and strategists in Washington, D.C. are agog over Indonesia and trumpeting its rise as a new BRIC country joining Brazil, Russia, India and China on the world stage and they are promoting Indonesia as a countervailing force vis-à-vis China in East Asia. This is all because the size and demographics of Indonesia makes it a potential regional power astride some of the world’s most important sea lines of communication.

Under the radar, a lot of them missed the prescient investments that the Pentagon has made in an even more strategically located country in maritime or island Southeast Asia, and that is Malaysia, which has a maritime border with the littoral countries of the South China Sea. Its twin halves of the Malay Peninsula and the north-western half of Borneo forms a V-shaped funnel at the centre of maritime or island Southeast Asia. Malaysia, geographically and culturally, has been for centuries an interconnector between the Sonic and Indian civilisations, so that the Malaccan Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula was the first target of Western powers beginning with the Portuguese, the Dutch and eventually the British in the age of the Western conquest of Asia.

Meanwhile, the Brunei Sultanate in north-western Borneo was like the Malaccan Sultanate in breadth, depth and influence on its corner of the South China Sea, so that the British, by occupying its geopolitical space, inherited its *ancien régime*. Indonesia does not have the geographic contiguity of Malaysia to mainland Southeast Asia while acting as the bridge to maritime or island Southeast Asia. Indonesia cannot even afford to guard

⁸ So far, the International Contact Group countries are either “fence-sitting” or “watching like a hawk” all the developments in the peace process, depending on who you talk to, since diplomats, like soldiers, are good at the waiting game. Some people feel that they are not fulfilling the role that was intended for them to hurry along the peace process, but we all know that most diplomatic work is done in the shadows, or the diplomats may just be bureaucratically timid.

or secure all of its borders, while Malaysia has done so given its less complicated and fragmented geography. Malaysia is unique or *sui generis* in Southeast Asia, being an “amphibian” country with significant geographic links both to the island countries of Southeast Asia and the mainland countries of Southeast Asia.

The genius of the British colonial cartographers was in realizing that by joining the two halves of their strategic colonial possessions in Southeast Asia, the Malay Peninsula and the north-western half of Borneo, together into one country, they would be birthing a potential successor to British geopolitical power and an anchor of stability in East Asia. In colonial times, British imperial power did not feel that they had to expand to Indonesia or what was known then as the Dutch East Indies once they possessed the two-halves of Malaysia.

For the British, having the Malay Peninsula and their colonial possessions in north-western Borneo allowed them the geopolitical leverage to project power both in mainland Southeast Asia, checking the Thai kingdom’s expansion in the Peninsula for example, and towards island Southeast Asia, looming over the Dutch to keep them on their side of the border in the island of Borneo, which geopolitical space they used to great effect during the *Konfrontasi* era in cowing or muting Sukarno’s anti-colonialist and nationalist regime in Indonesia, and aiming North Borneo (today’s Sabah) as a launching pad to the Philippines via the neighbouring Sulu archipelago allowing them to gain sovereign concessions and free trade privileges from both the Spanish regime in the Philippines and the Sultanate of Sulu. Having North Borneo as the last piece of the puzzle in their colonial possessions in Southeast Asia, gave the British an important foothold in the Greater Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Area.

The proof of the geopolitical advantages of Malaysia and of its geo-strategic location in the world map is how many Southeast Asian countries feel uncomfortable or irritated about Malaysia, evidenced by its varying diplomatic imbroglios with countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, who in one or way another feel that they cannot ignore Malaysia for being their strategically-located neighbour. Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia court Malaysia and so do great powers like China, Japan and India and even Australia and New Zealand, who are outside of the immediate neighbourhood of Southeast Asia. All of them feel they just have to have good relations with Malaysia. For all of these Asia-Pacific

countries, Malaysia is the itch (or wound scab) that they cannot help but scratch.

Many people are surprised when they find out that former Malaysian strongman Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, despite his nationalistic rants, signed a secret security agreement with the United States in 1984 that gave the Americans access to a jungle warfare training school in Johor and allowed them to set up a small-ship repair facility at Lumut and a plant in Kuala Lumpur to repair C-130 Hercules transport aircraft. Ever since that initial agreement, the access agreement with the United States has been expanded and continued by successive Malaysian governments.

Moreover, anecdotal evidence point to US military operatives of JSOTF-Philippines rotating out of Kota Kinabalu and other points of Sabah, Malaysia, in their deployments to Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. The United States also gave the Malaysians radar equipment for northern Sabah fronting the Sulu Sea.

Recently, the former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said during a visit to Japan in a press statement that “the United States will sustain its military presence in Northeast Asia and look to enhance it in Southeast Asia and will firmly defend the principle of freedom of navigation.”⁹ One security analyst commented in a foreign policy blog that the United States needed “diversifying US military-access and basing rights beyond Japan and Korea, deepening missile defence collaboration with these and other countries (including Taiwan), building up naval power in the Pacific and Indian oceans, and investing in next-generation technologies to counteract asymmetric Chinese weapons systems.”¹⁰

The American Enterprise Institute, in a major paper on ‘Security in the Indo-Pacific Commons’, envisions Malaysia’s role in American strategy thus:

“The United States should also pursue a new political strategy that explicitly links together both its close partners and strategically important nations that increasingly share common concerns. Conceptually, this new strategic arrangement can be thought of as a set of “concentric triangles.” The outer triangle links Japan, South

9 Takahashi, K. “Gates changes stripes on Okinawa”, *Asia Times* at www.atimes.com, January 15, 2011.

10 Twining, D., “Six challenges Obama faces in Asia in 2011, and six ways to overcome them”, January 5, 2011 at www.foreignpolicy.com.

Korea, India, and Australia; the inner triangle connects Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The outer triangle should serve as the anchor for security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, as well as for US policy in the region. The inner triangle will play a unique role in enhancing littoral security and focusing on the “inner commons” of the lower South China Sea.”¹¹

However, in spite of American policy makers’ wishes, Malaysia will continue to hedge playing off one Great Power over the other because its geopolitical situation does not allow it to become an independent counter-balancer of China in island or maritime Southeast Asia, unlike Indonesia. But there are indeed convergences in the security interests of Malaysia and the United States and none more so than in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. According to one Filipino analyst, Malaysia’s national interest requires its ultimate aim to be the protection of its sovereignty over Sabah state, with its vast natural resources and relatively low population. So, it is not in Malaysia’s interest to have a situation where peace is established in southern Philippines, if it results in a Moro government not friendly to Malaysia, or at least susceptible to its influence.¹²

Hence, a buffer zone, composed of an autonomous Muslim Mindanao region where the influence of the Philippine government can be held at bay, is what serves Malaysia’s interests. Malaysia will support peace talks if their objective is in harmony with its self-interest. If there is any deviation from Malaysian goals, Kuala Lumpur will shake things up by diplomatic posturing regardless of how this affects the Philippines.¹³

The Philippine claim to North Borneo, now Sabah State in Malaysia, was a product of a geopolitical contest between the Philippines (possibly in alliance with the United States) and Great Britain, similar to the Suez crisis between the British and the French on one side and the Americans, on the other, around the same period. The Philippines, using the dormant lease agreement of a British colonialist East Indies company with the Sultan of Sulu (this company also had a complementary lease agreement with the Sultan of Brunei) for North Borneo, claimed Sabah territory as the successor of the Sultanate of Sulu.

The real reason for the Philippine claim over Sabah was to forestall the creation of the federation of Malaysia, which Manila feared would

11 Auslin, M., *Security in the Indo-Pacific Commons*, American Enterprise Institute Press, December 15, 2010.

12 Quezon, M., “Search for an Honest Broker in Mindanao”, *Arab News*, May 14, 2008.

13 Ibid.

agitate the Moros of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago to secede. The Philippine claim was initially pursued by Filipino lawyer Nicasio Osmena, a grandson of former President Sergio Osmena, who was said to be close to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the late 1950s prior to the formation and formal declaration of independence of Malaysia. It was Nicasio Osmena who first revived the Sabah claim after obtaining a power of attorney from the Sultan of Sulu to pursue the Sabah claim.

Commenting in 1958 on the growth of Islamic solidarity in the Philippine south, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lennox-Boyd, informed the British Governors of North Borneo and Sarawak:

*“In the last year or so, thanks to the attention paid them by Indonesian, Pakistan and Egyptian governments, there has been a marked increase of Islamic consciousness among the Muslim minority in the Southern Philippines and there has grown up amongst them a feeling of unity and kinship with Muslim nations in Southeast Asia, which is not felt in the same way by the Christian majority.”*¹⁴

According to Lennox-Boyd, so strong was this Islamic consciousness that the Philippine government feared a secessionist outbreak in the south. Because Sulu and the Muslim provinces in Mindanao had centuries-old connections with Brunei and North Borneo, Manila was concerned that the formation of a predominantly Muslim federation of Malaysia, or even a federation of Borneo states, might threaten the unity of the Philippine state. This prospect might prompt the Philippine government, warned Lennox-Boyd, “to press a claim to North Borneo as a means of averting the danger.”¹⁵

In the meantime, Nicasio Osmena helped advance American involvement to the extent of recommending that “Uncle Sam take over and establish missile bases in Borneo” for the security of Southeast Asia, while a Moro politician, Senator Salipada Pendatun, who was an adopted son of an American educator, floated the idea in a speech in the Senate to end smuggling in the border with North Borneo by means of the Philippines claiming the territory of North Borneo, then leasing it to the United States to be fortified as a bastion against Communism in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

14 Poulgrain, G. *The Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, 1945-1965*, Crawford House Publishing, 1998, p. 236.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

At that time in the 1950s, China was still Red China and the Communists there were busy consolidating their grip in China and the Red Scare was the flavour of the times. According to George Clutton, the British Ambassador to Manila, the Americans were becoming “increasingly interested in North Borneo from the military point of view.”¹⁷ So, Pendatun’s speech was not dismissed as mere hyperbole by the British when the possibility existed that the American politico-military interests might support a Philippine claim to North Borneo.¹⁸

All of these geopolitical machinations went for naught when both the British and the Americans (with the Philippines playing a supporting role in tarnishing Communists in Indonesia, Brunei and Sarawak due to its own growing Communist movement) joined forces to move for the ouster of President Sukarno of Indonesia due to his perceived closeness to the Communists and Red China, beginning with a British instigated *Konfrontasi* with Indonesia that in turn led to the coup that brought Suharto into power with American assistance.

Konfrontasi provided the impetus for Great Britain to form Malaysia into one federation to combat the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, to which the Americans conceded because they were beginning to form their Domino Theory of Communism in Southeast Asia, and Malaysia could serve as a bulwark and a reliable and stable anchor of anti-Communism in maritime Southeast Asia, as the Americans continued the purge of the Communists in Indonesia.

Fast forwarding into the present, the Americans are dusting old plans regarding Southeast Asia as indicated by former Secretary Gates’ speech about enhancing United States military presence in Southeast Asia. The idea of missile bases in Sabah now seems an anachronism of the Cold War, the Red Scare and Domino Theory thinking. But the utility of having missile bases or, much more likely, anti-ballistic missile bases in the general area of the Sulu Sea which is bordered by Sabah in the south and Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago in the north may still be revived by the Americans. It is no longer feasible for the Americans to have such missile or anti-ballistic missile bases in Sabah because that particular geopolitical and historical

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

window has closed, but there is still the possibility of establishing it in the Sulu archipelago.¹⁹

For now, US Pacific Command vessels and troops, including its submarines, have free passage and unquestioned semi-permanent presence in the vital Sulu-Sulawesi Seas corridor while being allowed to resupply from nearby US military posts inside Philippine bases in Mindanao through its Mutual Logistics and Services Agreement and Voluntary Forces Agreement with the Philippine government, achieving a veritable “offshore or hovering base presence” (à la the science fiction or comic book rendering of a hover base).

In support to the US imperative of military access to Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, the current US policy is to help the peace process along towards a peace agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government. This policy allows the Philippine government breathing space to put its economic and governance house into order, while at the same time currying favour with the Moros desirous of an end to their conflict situation. By supporting the peace process, the US is at the same time hedging or insuring continued access to Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago with the Philippine government through the threat of a potential US claim to separate the Muslim Mindanao or just Sulu archipelago. It was MILF founder Salamat Hashim who invoked US treaties with the Moro sultanates that early in the American colonial period of the Philippines established a US protectorate over Moroland, which was then treated as unincorporated territory within the American colonial administration in the Philippine islands.²⁰

While others have said that a peace agreement is not necessary for US aims in Mindanao, they forget to mention that it is actually the peace process that facilitates the US entry into Moro homelands. Otherwise, without the peace process and a modicum of stability where there is an on-going ceasefire between the MILF and the Philippine government, the situation would be more like Somalia or Afghanistan with daily attacks and

19 But why, in the first place, would the United States even contemplate land-based missiles or anti-ballistic missiles that are within reach of China's numerous short range ballistic missiles or tactical missiles on the Chinese mainland? This is because even if potential US missile and anti-ballistic missile bases in the Sulu archipelago will provide only a momentary distraction or be able to shoot down just a few missiles from China before those bases are destroyed, they will have served their purpose, if it allows the United States military to launch a counter strike or Second Strike against the Chinese vital installations in the mainland.

20 Letter of Salamat Hashim, the late founder and Chairman of the MILF, dated May 20, 2003 to US President George W. Bush.

ambuscades or a situation of low-intensity guerrilla warfare which might draw American troops to fight in a war that is not their own and provides no strategic rationale, since what they want for now is just military access in the area.

However, if the peace process drags on and there is instability as a result of lack of progress in the peace talks, the US will have to step in eventually to apply the necessary pressure on the Philippine government to offer substantial concessions to the Moros to forge a peace agreement under a US imposed peace plan. If worse comes to worst, the US can also take advantage of any outbreak of war to conduct “humanitarian intervention” to advance its agenda for permanent access akin to the Kosovo model.

Among the wildest scenarios, if the Philippine government is not able to forge a peace agreement with the Moros and war breaks out again in Mindanao, is that the Sulu archipelago might break-off or spin-off from the rest of the Philippines through American sponsorship by invoking the 1898 Kiram-Bates treaty, wherein the US granted the then Sultanate of Sulu the status of a protectorate. The protectorate was unilaterally abrogated by the US subsequently but the Moros of Sulu were not a party to it. So, it is not inconceivable that it may be invoked by the US as a form of intervention.

Breaking off Sulu to be its protectorate would mean that the US can establish a permanent missile and anti-ballistic missile base in Sulu. Plus, there is the potentially huge hydrocarbon bonanza in the Sulu Sea where US oil supermajor, Exxon-Mobil, is already engaged in oil and gas exploration and has announced some preliminary discoveries.²¹ Afterwards, the US, even if it is desirous only of Sulu as a base of operations, would have to use the MILF, the bulk of whose forces are in Central Mindanao, as a hedge against the AFP. Similar to the Anbar Awakening strategy in Iraq, the US would have to arm the MILF to keep the AFP occupied in mainland Mindanao.

Eventually, the Philippine government would have to concede that it did not have the military power to ensure Philippine territorial integrity and may just ask for Chinese assistance to keep its war effort going and setting-up a stage for proxy war between the Chinese and the US. This scenario

21 Reports say it is upwards of 750 million barrels of oil or oil equivalent for just one discovery in the Sulu Sea, and there are more “elephant” oil wells waiting to be drilled.

sounds inconceivable at present, but stranger things have happened in history.

One thing is certain in the above scenario: in order to have an American protectorate in the Sulu archipelago, the Americans would have to at least obtain the tacit consent of Malaysia. Otherwise, China could either woo or intimidate Malaysia and put up countervailing measures against US designs in the Sulu archipelago in Sabah. For the Philippines to forestall any American plan to separate the Sulu archipelago and put up missile and anti-ballistic missile bases there, it has to cultivate and strengthen its ties with Malaysia and make it a close ally.

Given all these permutations and calculations, the Malaysians have assumed the role of managing the negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF. Now, the Malaysians must face their dilemma. It is all very well to want to facilitate the peace talks as a neutral third-party, but the most important party – the United States – is not at the table Malaysia wants to play a leading role in island or maritime Southeast Asia and East Asia as a whole without risking too much in terms of hard power. The problem for Malaysia, therefore, is not so much bringing the parties to conclude a peace agreement (whose outlines have already been defined by the botched Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain between the two parties), but reconciling the underlying American interest in the outcome of the negotiations and the Philippine position of maintaining Philippine territorial integrity and sovereignty.

While the United States has declared its policy that it wants to preserve Philippine territorial integrity, it has not categorically stated that it will uphold Philippine sovereignty in the Moro areas of Mindanao and Sulu archipelago. This then is a tough task for Malaysia because, ostensibly, the Philippines and the US are treaty allies and the Philippines is supposed to be the closest to the US within ASEAN because of cultural, family, linguistic and historical ties. However, as the Philippines is increasingly ‘Finlandised’ vis-à-vis China, the United States’ strategic interest and Philippine national interest are beginning to diverge unless the peace process can reconcile them, which makes the MILF (and its following) a key player to be courted.

In conclusion I would like to paraphrase George Friedman and transpose another geopolitical chessboard from the Middle East to what is happening presently in Southeast Asia:

“Having regional power is not a concept. It is a complex and unpleasant process of balancing contradictory interests in order to prevent greater threats to a country’s interests emerging in the long run. Having positioned itself as a host for negotiations between [the Philippine government on one hand, and the MILF on the other hand, with the International Contact Group for Mindanao ready to intervene at the slightest opportunity], it has a basic decision to make: It can merely provide a table for the discussion, or it can shape and guarantee the outcome. As the Americans have learned, no one will thank them for it, and no one will think better of them for doing it. The only reason for a deeper involvement as mediator in the peace talks is that stabilizing the region and maintaining the [US-China] balance of power is in [Malaysia’s] national interest. But it will be a wrenching shift to [Malaysia’s] internal political culture [of upholding ASEAN solidarity and principle of non-interference]. It is also an inevitable shift [for regional power status]. If not now, then later.”²²

²² Friedman, G. “The Turkish Role in Negotiations with Iran”, *Geopolitical Weekly*, Stratfor.com, January 11, 2011.