

Terrorism in the Philippines and Its Influence on Great Powers

Michael K. Logan, M.A.
University of Nebraska Omaha
mlogan@unomaha.edu

Lauren Zimmerman
University of Nebraska Omaha
lzimmerman@unomaha.edu

Brittnee Parker
University of Nebraska Omaha
brittneeparker@unomaha.edu

Gina S. Ligon, Ph.D.*
University of Nebraska Omaha
gligon@unomaha.edu

Abstract

We examine four active Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) and their capacity to disrupt Chinese influence in the Philippines. The four VNSAs include the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, the Moro National Liberation Front, and the New People's Army. Drawing from both the Leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results project and the Global Terrorism Database, we focus on each VNSA's organizational and leadership capabilities as well as their tactical patterns between 2012 and 2017. Our findings suggest that, of the four VNSAs, the New People's Army has both the motivation and resources to spoil Chinese influence in the Philippines.

**The authors would like to thank Dr. Haroro Ingram, The Program on Extremism at George Washington University, for his subject matter expertise that contributed to this report.*

Background

The Chinese and Filipino governments have contested territorial claims in the South China Sea. This international waterway grants strategic power to any who operates within its waters. It is responsible for carrying \$3 trillion in trade every year; one-third of the world's shipping passes through it; oil and gas reserves are believed to lie beneath it, and its fisheries feed millions in Southeast Asia each year (Global Conflict Tracker, 2019). In January 2013, former Filipino President Benigno Aquino officially began arbitrary proceedings against China's claim to the sea. On July 12, 2016, the Hague tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines' claim to the South China Sea. China rejected this decision, and three months later, current Filipino President Rodrigo R. Duterte, announced his "Build, Build, Build Initiative" (McLaughlin, 2019). While the Philippines has experienced some economic growth in recent years, the country still struggles with poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity. The goal of Duterte's initiative is to close this gap and secure his legacy by increase infrastructural development in the Philippines. However, in order to accomplish this goal, Duterte has decided China needs to foot the bill (Miller, 2018).

During his first state visit to China in October 2016, Duterte secured \$24 billion in Chinese investment to upgrade Filipino infrastructure which included 29 deals (10 are said to be "big ticket" infrastructure projects), of which only one was moved toward implementation to date (Cardenas, 2017). President Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed an agreement to jointly explore oil and gas development in the South China Sea despite China's lack of sovereignty. In theory, this creates a mutually beneficial relationship in which the Philippines receives aid and funding for infrastructure, and China is granted access to the South China Sea and all its resources. This has also "angered many Filipinos who accuse Duterte of making geopolitical concessions in the South China Sea for Chinese capital that has yet to materialize" (Chandran, 2018). Rising property values and a large influx of Chinese workers are also among the concerns expressed by many Filipino people (Cook, 2019).

In this study, we examine four active Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) and their capacity to disrupt Chinese influence in the Philippines. VNSAs are defined as distinctive organizations willing and capable of using violence for pursuing their objectives and not contractually integrated into formal state institutions (Hofman & Schneckener, 2011). VNSAs can be distinguished from one another based on several dimensions, such as their goals and relationships with other criminal organizations. For this study, we compare each VNSA based on their organizational and leadership characteristics. We also examine the tactical trends of each VNSA to provide insight into their capabilities. Data for this effort come from both the Leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results (LEADIR) project and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Our findings suggest that, of the four VNSAs, the New People's Army has both the motivation and resources to spoil Chinese influence in the Philippines.

LEADIR Dataset and Key Terms

In this study, we utilize the LEADIR project to assess differences in organizational sophistication and leadership decision-making between four VNSAs. Broadly speaking, the LEADIR project houses data on 280 active VNSAs and 299 of their corresponding leaders. For this effort, we examined degrees of organizational sophistication, which consists of three interlinked concepts: centralization, formalization, and specialization (Logan & Ligon, 2019). Centralization refers to the degree to which decision-making is concentrated. Formalization refers to the extent to which rules and procedures are used to govern the behaviors of members of the organization. Specialization refers to the degree

to which the organization is composed of many interrelated parts. In general, VNSAs with high degrees of organizational sophistication are better equipped to engage in complex tactics and operations and coordinate with other VNSAs. At the leader-level, we assess the degree to which each leader has strategic compared to operational influence. Strategic influence refers to the degree to which a leader has influence over the goals or mission of the organization, whereas operational influence refers to the degree to which a leader has influence over the operational, day-to-day aspects of the organization (e.g., fundraising, weapons procurement). We argue that leaders with strategic influence have a unique capacity to motivate followers to sacrifice personally for the strategic goals of the organization.

Potential Spoilers: VNSAs and their Leaders

As illustrated in Table 1, the four VNSAs examined in this effort include the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, the Moro National Liberation Front, and the New People's Army. These VNSAs were selected based on three criteria: 1) they met the criteria of what makes an "organization" outlined by Ligon and colleagues (2013), 2) they were active at the time of the study, and 3) they had ten or more attacks between 2012 and 2017. In the sections below, we describe the organizational features and leadership characteristics of each VNSA.

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is an Islamic separatist organization founded in 1991. ASG seeks to provide the Moros, a Filipino minority in the Mindanao region, an independent Salafist Sunni Islamic State. The estimated membership of ASG is between 100 and 1,000 members, making them one of the smaller VNSAs in the Philippines. ASG has received training and funding from other Islamic Militant Organizations such as Al Qaeda in the past. Currently, ASG finances itself through kidnappings for ransom, extortion, smuggling, and marijuana sales. Despite their underlying ideological narrative, the organization appears to be quite motivated by pragmatic material gain.



Abu Sayyaf Group's Flag (NCTC, 2014)

Since the death of several key figures in 2006-2007, the central leadership of the ASG was relatively fragmented. At present, Radulan Sahiron is viewed as the leader of the ASG, who has been part of Abu Sayyaf since 1993. Based on the existing evidence, it appears that Sahiron has considerable operational influence over a sizeable portion of the group. This likely stems from Sahiron's background as a military commander within the ASG. Before taking a central leadership role, Sahiron operated as the leader of ASG's Putol group, composed of an estimated 100 members. Sahiron also led approximately 18 armed groups as the commander of the Sulu-based ASG (treasury.gov, 2005). However, Sahiron lacks strategic influence, considering the degree to which several groups have broken off from ASG in recent years to pursue their own ideological goals. For instance, in July 2014, the Basilian-faction of ASG and its leader, Isnilon Hapilon, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The faction has since been designated ISIS' leader in the Southern Philippines, and due to the admiration of ISIS within ASG ranks, the group could continue to fracture (Gunaratna, 2016).

Table 1. Contemporary VNSAs in the Philippines

VNSA	Founded	Size	Ideology/Goals
Abu Sayyaf Group	1991	100 – 1,000	Religious/Ethno-Separatists
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	2010	100 – 1,000	Religious/Ethno-Separatists
Moro National Liberation Front	1972	1,000 – 5,000	Ethno-Separatists
New People's Army	1969	1,000 – 5,000	Left-Wing

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) is an Islamic separatist organization similar to the Abu Sayyaf Group, which seeks an independent Islamic State for the Moro people. BIFF was formed in 2010 after breaking away from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). BIFF is relatively centralized and has an estimated membership of between 100 and 1,000 members. When starting BIFF, the group’s founder, Ameril Umbra Kato, stole a stockpile of weapons from MILF’s largest and most well-armed field division. As a result, BIFF possesses machine guns, pistols, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), sniper rifles, and landmines. BIFF funds itself through the extortion of community members and businesses, claiming the money and food are donations rather than taxation.

BIFF founder, Ameril Umbra Kato, is well educated, and one of three leaders examined in this effort to have received a college degree. This allowed him to have a great deal of strategic influence over BIFF. However, Kato had a stroke in November 2011, causing paralysis that caused him to go into hiding while he attempted rehab (Chalk, 2013). After Kato’s stroke, Mohammad Ali Tambako took over the reins and controlled the organization for approximately a year before being voted in as Kato’s replacement. Tambako claims to have been educated abroad, allowing him to build up contacts with international groups and successfully continue to operate the group. However, Tambako was not well-liked, especially after he launched an attack against a Christian community in a Muslim-majority region that ended with his forces decapitating a farmer (Tejas, 2015). This led to him being forced out of BIFF and forming his own group. The current leader of BIFF is Esmael Abubakar, although there is some haziness around his leadership. Abubakar was not immediately marked as the leader due to some riffs within the group. It seems that Abubakar had issues with the religious leadership within BIFF, having fired the group’s imam. Abubakar would later split from the main section of BIFF to create his own group and commit himself to the Islamic State (“Mindanao, ‘New land of jihad’ — analyst,” n.d.). Since Abubakar’s departure, a relatively unknown leader, Esmail Abdulmalik, has been denoted as the leader of the remaining BIFF fighters. Punzalan, 2019). Abdulmalik was previously involved in MILF. However, there are contradicting reports as to whether he was high-ranking or influential within the group.

Table 2. Contemporary VNSA Leaders in the Philippines

VNSA	Leader Name	Leader Tenure
Abu Sayyaf Group	Radulan Sahiron	2006 - present
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	Mohammad Ali Tambako Ismail Abuakar	2011 – 2014 2015 - present
Moro National Liberation Front	Nur Misuari	1972 - present
New People's Army	Benito Tiamzon	1987 – 2014
	Adelberto Silva	2014 – 2015
	Jaime Padilla	2015 - present

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was founded in 1972 and sought an independent or autonomous state in the southern Philippines for the Moro people. The organization claims to represent Filipino Muslims but has not attempted to push an Islamic agenda; instead, emphasizing shared homeland and oppression by the central government. MNLF was considered the leading separatist movement for the Moro people for two decades but weakened substantially in the late 1990s after the organization signed the Jakarta Peace Agreement, which formally ended their arms struggle with the Filipino government. During this time, many members chose to enter mainstream society or take government positions. This agreement fostered further discontent within the organization. Many remaining members chose to leave and join MILF, who denounced the agreement in support of full independence for the Moros (Pitre, 2018). Today the organization has an estimated 1,000 to 5,000 members and is low on both centralization and specialization. MNLF primarily laid down its armed struggle in the late 1990s, as many members chose to integrate into society.

The leadership of MNLF is fractionalized, having differing leaders who, at times, express conflicting goals. That said, Nur Misuari is most frequently viewed as the central leader and was one of the founding leaders in 1972. Misuari is well-educated, receiving an advanced graduate degree from the University of the Philippines. Until recently, Misuari had a sizeable amount of strategic and operation influence. Misuari is a powerful player in domestic politics, having a relationship with Philippines President Duterte (Cau, 2017). Duterte and Misuari have spoken at length about implementing federalism in the Philippines, and Duterte has reached out to Misuari about creating peace in the Mindanao region. Having Misuari so involved in the peace process allows there to be direct input and influence from MNLF.



Moro National Liberation Front's Flag and Fighters (photo courtesy of *The CTC Sentinel* at West Point, 2010).

The New People's Army (NPA) was founded in 1969 as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The NPA seeks to overthrow the Philippine government and establish a new people's democratic state with the working class at the forefront of a cultural revolution. The organization also seeks to expel capitalist influence from the Philippines and redistribute land to the poor. The NPA follows a hierarchical structure and centralized with an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 members. The organization finances itself through "revolutionary taxes," extorting money from local business owners and those wishing to campaign in their territory. They have acquired most of their arms through interactions (raids, battles, and scuffles) with the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The NPA has struggled with its leaders' arrests over time. Benito Tiamzon headed the NPA, alongside his wife, Wilma. Tiamzon ranked high on strategic influence, having been remarked to still hold power for at least a year after being arrested and jailed. He was released to be part of official negotiations between the Philippines government and groups fighting the government. Tiamzon is well educated with a degree in chemical engineering and history. This allowed Tiamzon to have increased knowledge in sophisticated weapons and history that he could draw on for recruitment and consolidating foot soldiers from different factions.

Jose Maria Sison also has a large degree of strategic influence in the NPA. Jose Maria Sison was one of the founders of the NPA, although he is currently in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands since peace talks failed in 1987. Sison is still listed as the NPA's leader in some news sources though others name him as the "Chief Political Consultant" (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2015). Since founding the NPA, Sison has been more politically active, allowing other members to control the militant wing of the NPA (Pacete, 2017). Sison is currently expanding his strategic influence by writing books and essays, mainly discussing reform and revolution in the NPA and the Philippines, more broadly. These writings are an attempt by Sison to keep some appearance of control to the public.

There have been internal rifts within the NPA that have pushed to weaken the power of Sison, due in part to Sison stepping out of his norms (Domingo, 2013). He has specifically butted heads in the past with the Tiamzons, who are also still well-known within the Philippines.



More recently, Adelberto Silva and Jamie Padilla have been noted as important leaders within the NPA. Silva was said to be the "the overall orchestrator of rebel movements in the entire country" until his arrest in 2018 (Tabalong, 2018). Padilla acts currently as the only known leader to the group, though he is named as their spokesman. This has put him at the forefront of the organization.

Organizational and Leadership Summary

As illustrated above, the four VNSAs vary in organizational and leadership characteristics. In terms of organizational sophistication, NPA ranks highest on complexity. For instance, the NPA is highly centralized and governed by a 26-member Central Committee who also oversees the Communist Party of the Philippines. The Central Committee runs the day-to-day aspects of the NPA, crafts organizational policies, and implements strategic decisions. The large 26-member committee ensures that a diverse range of interests are being represented as opposed to having a single leader. This type of decision-making structure is like leadership structures that guide many Salafi-Jihadist VNSAs. The Central Committee's decisions are transmitted down to regional committees to execute. This allows the central committee to focus on the long-term strategy of the organization, while mid-level managers enjoy operational and tactical autonomy. Granting autonomy to lower-level members ensures operational efficiency since day-to-day decisions do not have to flow through the multiple layers of a bureaucratic structure. Ligon and Logan (2017) reported that a similar decision-making structure was used by Islamic State governors to deploy security forces without the a priori, specific approval of the Central Shura leadership council.

The NPA is also highly formalized and specialized. For instance, the NPA uses uniforms to distinguish differences in authority between members as well as denote members versus non-members. This allows for "rapid decision making as titles and uniforms connote important member specialization

and tenure information that can quickly be understood in a crisis” (Logan & Ligon, 2019). In terms of specialization, the NPA is not just interested in violence. In fact, the NPA provides social services such as education, security, and health in impoverished areas across the Philippines. This is important as it not only increases popular support for the organization but also allows the NPA to focus on expertise-based recruitment. In other words, engaging in pragmatic functions (e.g., education, medicine) allows the NPA to recruit specialized individuals they might not have access to if they were only focused on violence.

In contrast, the ASG, BIFF, and MNLF rate low on organizational sophistication. Each of the three groups shares common organizational characteristics, such as fractured leadership and little organizational specialization. The ASG and, to a lesser extent, the BIFF tend to focus on material as opposed to ideological goals. The once-powerful MNLF is now a fraction of its former self. Since the 1996 peace agreements, the MNLF consists of various factions with different leaders, goals, and allies. These three VNSAs do not have organizational resources or capabilities comparable to the NPA.

Tactical Patterns and Chinese Development

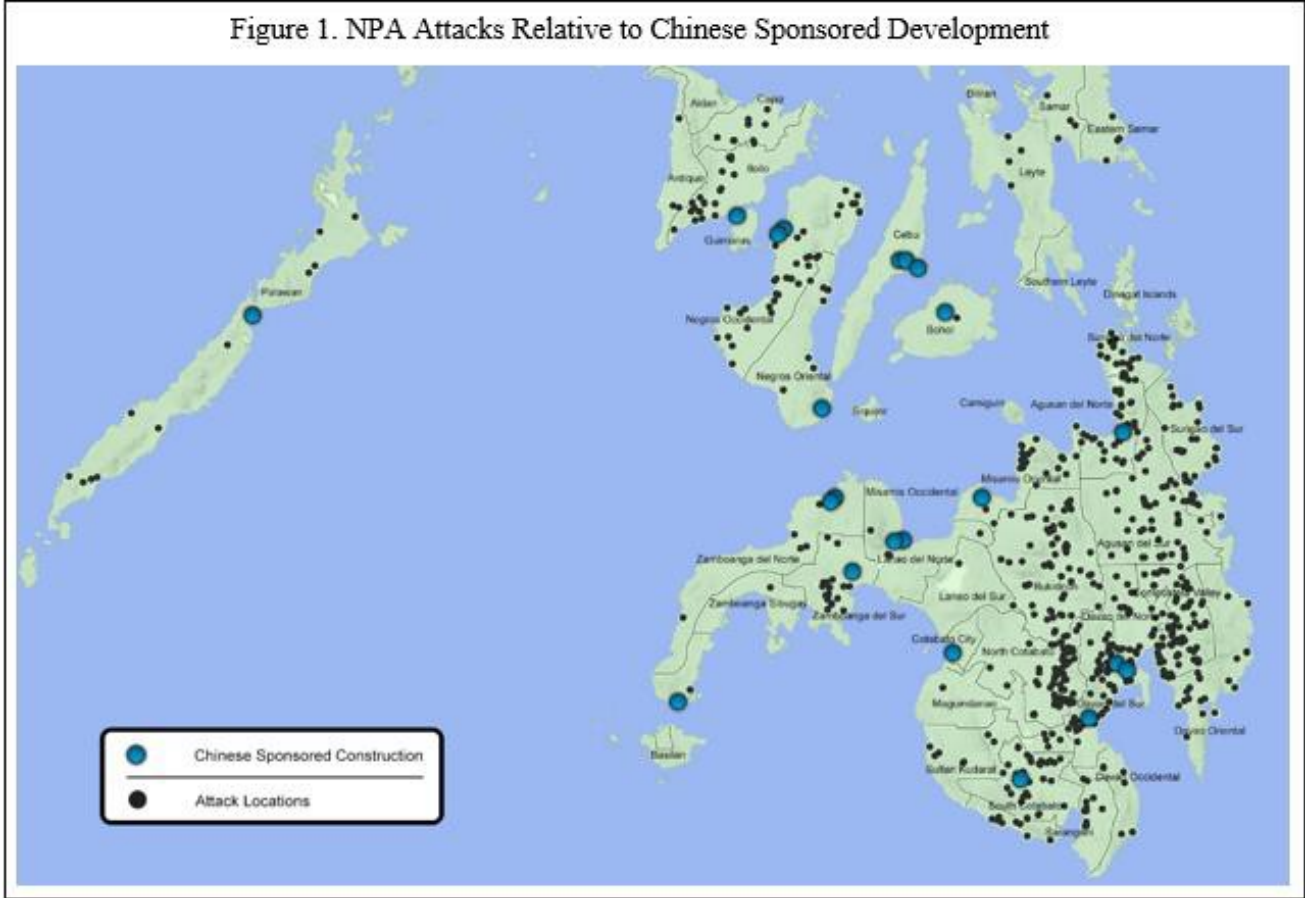
Table 3 shows the tactical patterns between 2012 and 2017 for each of the four VNSAs examined in this paper. The data for this section was supplied by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD, 2019).¹ When comparing the tactical trends, there are three important trends to discuss. First, the overwhelming amount of terroristic violence in the Philippines is linked to the NPA. The NPA accounts for approximately 67 percent of terror attacks between the four organizations. This shows that the NPA is by far the most active VNSA in the Philippines. To a lesser extent, the BIFF and ASG are also active, accounting for 17% and 15% of attacks between the four groups. There is a reason to suspect that these groups may experience a decline in violence in the coming years, given their current leadership crises. Finally, the MNLF accounts for very little violence in the region.

Table 3. Tactical Pattern (2012 – 2017)

VNSA	Number of Attacks	Region of Attacks	Attack Types
Abu Sayyaf Group	293	Basilan (120) Sulu (107) Zamboanga Sibugay (24)	Bombing (101) Kidnapping (87) Armed Assault (71)
Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters	333	Maguindanao (222) North Cotabato (86) Sultan Kudarat (14)	Bombing (156) Armed Assault (137) Kidnapping/Assassination (7)
Moro National Liberation Front	14	Zamboanga Sibugay (5)	Armed Assault/Bombing (6)
New People's Army	1323	Compostela Valley (127) North Cotabato (104) Bukidnon (82)	Armed Assault (578) Bombing (250) Infrastructure Attack (198)

¹ We selected 2012 as the start point for our analysis since this was when much of the recent conflict over the South China Sea occurred between China and the Philippines. More specifically, this coincides with the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident when the Philippines naval forces intercepted eight Chinese fishing vessels, leading two a two-month standoff between the countries (Xu, 2014).

Second, the geographical attack patterns for each VNSA are concentrated except for the NPA. For example, over 77% of ASG's and 92% of BIFF's attacks are clustered in two regions. Conversely, no one region has experienced more than 10% of the NPA's attacks. This type of tactical diversity not only stretches state defenses and security but also shows the widespread influence of the NPA within the Philippines. The degree to which the NPA's attacks are geographically diverse also has implications for Chinese development. As shown on Figure 1, the NPA has committed attacks near several proposed infrastructure projects in the Philippines. Given the NPA's tactical success in the areas, it is likely that the organization has both the knowledge and resources to do so again. In contrast, the other three VNSAs have less experience in perpetrating attacks in these regions. Their lack of experience in these areas likely means that these VNSAs would have to commit a sizeable amount of resources to successful attack these targets. It is unlikely that these already fractured organizations are capable of this level of collaboration.

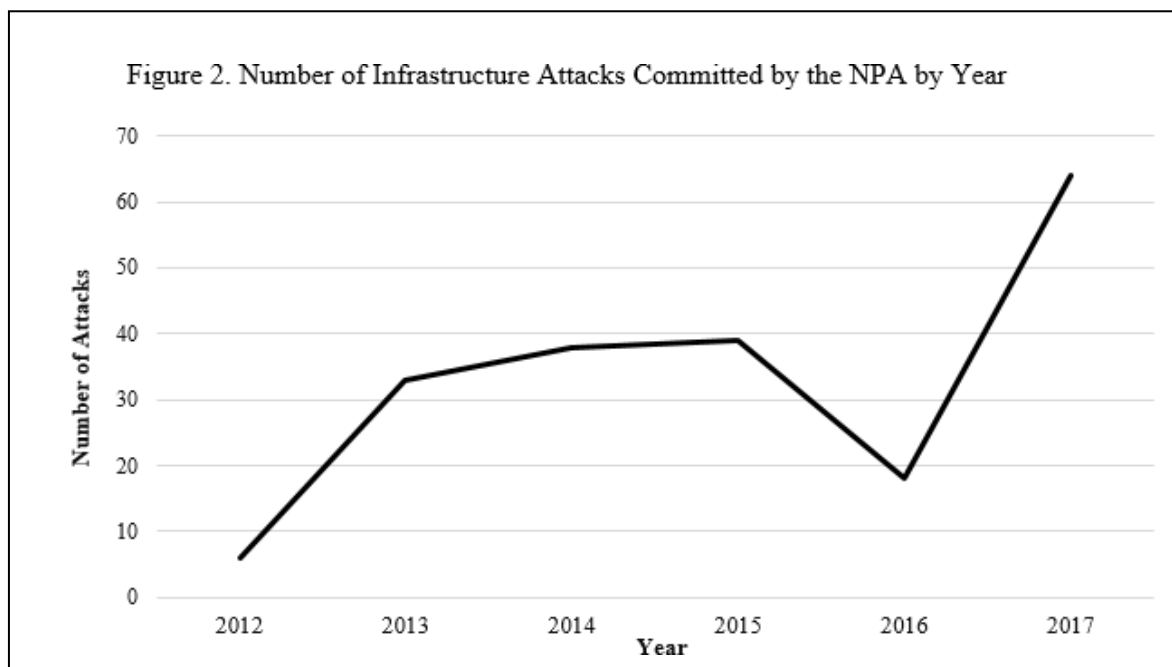


Third, bombings and armed assaults are the preferred attack types for each of the VNSAs. This is not surprising given that this is true for the vast majority of terrorist organizations (Koehler-Derrick & Milton, 2017). A closer look at the ASG, and to a lesser extent the BIFF, suggest that kidnappings are a regular type of attack used by both organizations. This is in line with current notions that both groups, the ASG in particular, are trying to balance their pragmatic (i.e., financial) and ideological goals. In other words, the need to raise funds to sustain the group has taken priority over the ideological, foundational goals of these groups. At present, both groups are more similar to traditional criminal groups, such as gangs, as opposed to terrorist organizations. The NPA, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in infrastructure attacks compared to the other VNSAs. As shown in Table 3, infrastructure attacks are the third most common attack type for the NPA. This

includes attacks on construction sites and equipment, farms and ranches, mining facilities, industrial facilities, factories, and multinational corporations. Attacks on these targets are selective and require a moderate degree of expertise relative to other target types. In order to maximize damage on infrastructure, for instance, it is important that the perpetrators have both perceptual (knowledge of the target) and procedural (knowledge of terroristic methods) skills. Given the NPA’s organizational complexity, it is likely that they have the human capital and expertise within the organization to conduct such attacks.

Looking Ahead

Based on our analysis of the organizational, leadership, and tactical data, we believe that the NPA has both the potential to disrupt and act as a potential spoiler in the spread of Chinese influence in the Philippines. Based on current trends, the NPA has shown the ability to strike infrastructure and other high-value targets in areas across the Philippines. In fact, Figure 2 shows that the number of infrastructure attacks perpetrated by the NPA rose in 2017. In a more recent example, NPA militants showed their capacity to attack infrastructure by targeting a construction site at the Bicol International Airport on July 27, 2019. Nearly a month later, on August 20, 2019, NPA operatives attacked a quarry site located at a power plant.²



If Chinese influence and development continue to spread, we also suspect that there will be a larger pool of recruits for the NPA to attract. This is primarily due to the influx of Chinese workers that are likely to follow Chinese-financed infrastructure projects across the Philippines. Despite Duarte’s promise of job growth, many of these positions will be filled by Chinese workers—not locals. If this continues, the NPA and their communist message may become a plausible alternative for many

² See “<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1076189>” for a full description of Bicol International Airport attack and “<https://businessmirror.com.ph/2019/08/20/soldiers-point-to-npa-for-attack-on-quarry-site/>” for the attack on the quarry site.

disenfranchised Filipinos—the same way the NPA has been for many poor, rural Filipinos for decades.

There is also an underlying motivation for the NPA to attack Chinese-affiliates targets. Historically, the NPA modeled its principles on China's Maoist movement and received weapons, support, and funding from China. However, this relationship appears to have waned—especially as Chinese-Philippine relations have normalized. Today, there is no evidence that China supports the NPA in any fashion. The NPA has become explicitly disenfranchised with the “pseudo-capitalist” society that it perceives China to manifest. Furthermore, recent China-Philippines arms deals may be viewed as an indirect move against the NPA, further aggravating the organization's stance on China. Given this history and the NPA's motivation, the findings from LEADIR of NPA's sophistication, and the dynamic environment under President Duterte, it is our assessment that NPA will serve as a significant “spoiler” to China's infrastructure projects in its efforts to gain leverage for the strategic goal of obtaining access to the South China Sea.

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