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Security Nexus Perspectives

CORONAVIRUS, TERRORISM, AND ILLICIT ACTIVITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

By J. “Lumpy” Lumbaca*



What are the “bad actors” in the Indo-Pacific up to as a result of the coronavirus pandemic? Those involved in illicit activities are taking advantage of an environment where nations across the region are focused on immediate health threats over security. The Islamic State (IS) has described the global pandemic as painful torment inflicted upon “crusader nations.” The latest issue of IS’ *al-Naba* newsletter encourages jihadists to free prisoners and devise new [attacks](#) while the West is struggling. But it is not just terrorists who are looking to benefit from the security vacuum that has overpowered the world. Criminal organizations and even nation states themselves have found opportunities to exploit.

In the Philippines, the Communist Party of the Philippines, New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) has apparently arrived at a cease-fire with the Duterte government. Originally, however, the cease-fire was a unilateral declaration made by the Duterte government. In the time between declaring the [cease-fire](#) and the CPP agreeing to it, there were several armed skirmishes initiated by the communist rebels. In one case, AFP forces were actually on a coronavirus public awareness [campaign](#) in Zamboanga when they were fired upon.

In North Korea, border crossing points with China have been closed on top of restrictions to business activities and social movement. In North Hamgyong, where people struggle to maintain a living even without a global pandemic, increased numbers of desperate traders are shifting work to methamphetamine trafficking in order to survive. While meth production in North Korea is common - and was even

* J. “Lumpy” Lumbaca is a Department of Defense Associate Professor of counter-terrorism and illicit activities at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii. A United States Army Special Forces Officer (Retired), he spent twenty years conducting special operations throughout the Indo-Pacific. He can be followed on Twitter [@LumpyAsia](#) or [Facebook](#).

sponsored by the government itself to generate revenue in the 2000s - Corona has boosted [private production](#) with rumors of the product helping prevent or even cure the disease.

Fake news and social media manipulation in Asia has not escaped the coronavirus frenzy either. In Singapore, an old [video](#) of a counter-terrorism drill in Terminal 3 of Changi airport resurfaced. The proliferators of the clip, however, misleadingly labeled the footage as video evidence of brutality inside of China as the Chinese Communist Party dealt with coronavirus troubles. In early March, Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for China's Ministry Of Foreign Affairs, [accused](#) the United States of spreading the virus in Wuhan.

State actors themselves are taking advantage of virus concerns as an excuse to silence opposition. In China, property tycoon Ren Zhiqiang, also known as "The Cannon," wrote in a recent commentary that Xi Jinping was a power-hungry "clown." Ren claimed that the Chinese Communist Party's strict limits on free speech exacerbated the coronavirus epidemic. Ren "The Cannon" has since [disappeared](#). In Hong Kong, pro-democracy lawmakers [claim](#) police are now making arbitrary arrests following protests against a coronavirus clinic scheduled to be built in Kowloon.

With the threat environment thus evolving, how have governments and their security practitioners in South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia reacted to the coronavirus pandemic? An understandable but unfortunate trend appears to be a retraction of security efforts. India, for example, is considering [halting](#) counter-insurgency operations against armed Maoists in the Naxal belt of India. Security forces and healthcare workers alike are troubled. After all, entering Naxal-controlled areas is dangerous enough from a security standpoint without coronavirus.

With hopes dashed of finally being removed from the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) gray list, Pakistan is instead facing the likelihood that it does not have the resources to confront both terrorist financing and coronavirus at the same time. Pakistan has repeatedly stated that it has taken concrete measures to eliminate terror groups and their financing. With at least 900 infections across the country, however, Senator Rehman Malik, chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Interior, [wrote](#) to the FATF asking to be removed from the gray list so that Pakistan could devote all of its resources to fight the disease.

In the Philippines, a Marine battalion "meant originally for anti-terror duty in Sulu province" [was sent](#) north to Metro Manila to "reinforce soldiers and policemen already deployed to enforce President Rodrigo Duterte's enhanced community quarantine against the coronavirus pandemic." More recently, Admiral Phil Davidson, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, announced that the annual [Balikatan](#) joint exercise focused on counter-terrorism, crisis action-planning, and internal procedures has been canceled for 2020 because of coronavirus concerns.

One visible exception to the scaling back of security activities was the third annual China-Cambodia Golden Dragon exercise held from March 15 to March 31. With a combined force of 3,000 troops from both countries focused on counter-terrorism and humanitarian assistance, the exercise demonstrated China's determination to remain engaged with its staunchest ally in Southeast Asia despite coronavirus concerns.

Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh noted that, “This exercise does not mean that we do not care about the outbreak of COVID-19. We care about that [virus] as well but were committed to having the exercise.”

In light of social distancing, quarantines, overextended global healthcare systems, limited resources, infected manpower, and a general sense of fear during the most deadly global pandemic since the 1918 flu, how can governments and their security practitioners maintain pressure on terrorists, criminals, and others involved in illicit activities? First, we should all be reminded that the virus does not discriminate, and that bad actors are equally susceptible. Islamic State calls for God to increase the [torment](#) of the “crusaders” while saving the “believers” from harm are both optimistic and unrealistic. Our foes are facing the same exact threat we are.

Secondly, in practical terms, governments and their military forces, intelligence services, law enforcement agencies, and other contributors to the security sector must continue to share information. Fortunately, this can be done over virtual networks and need not always put officials in physical harm’s way. There will be times when physical action on the part of the security sector is simply unavoidable. Not all bad actors are concerned with health concerns after all. Despite that reality, the greatest strategic tool the region can employ collectively against illicit activity is cooperation. While sharing information continues, however, it is imperative that we adapt to the “new normal” borne of coronavirus. Our evolving analysis and collaboration must now include new keys to intelligence, such as how threats are adapting and operating in the coronavirus world. What are the trends, loopholes, and innovations being utilized by illicit actors as a result of the pandemic? It is this type of information which our friends, partners, and allies will benefit from most.

Even if our security apparatuses are not able to fully confront threats as rapidly as we would prefer because of health and safety limitations, we must nevertheless continue to identify and share information, best practices, and lessons learned. One day, after the curve has been “flattened” and the region has moved past the coronavirus, information collected and shared during the lockdown will be critical to understanding the new threats that will have emerged.

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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