

U.S.-Philippines relations post September 11 : security dilemmas of a front-line state in the war on terrorism

Anthony, Mely Caballero

2002

Anthony, M. C. (2002). U.S.-Philippines relations post September 11 : security dilemmas of a front-line state in the war on terrorism. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 020). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/90711>

Nanyang Technological University

Downloaded on 24 Apr 2025 09:05:21 SGT



IDSS COMMENTARIES (20/2002)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

U.S.-PHILIPPINES RELATIONS POST SEPTEMBER 11: SECURITY DILEMMAS OF A FRONT-LINE STATE IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

Mely Caballero-Anthony*

1 October 2002

A decade after the closing down of the two U.S. military bases in the Philippines, the bilateral relationship between the two allies has found a new *raison d'être* in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was among the first state leaders to declare her support of America's war against terrorism. As a result, U.S.-R.P. relations have become closer than they have ever been.

But the Philippines' support for the "war on terrorism" has evoked a diversity of reactions from outright opposition by the far-left to caution about diminished sovereignty by the ultra-right. In fact, the debates on renewed U.S.-R.P. ties and the "war on terrorism" both global and domestic, are almost *déjà vu* – harking back to circa 70s and 80s when the country was deeply divided on how best to handle the American military presence in the country.

Unfolding the "New" U.S.-R.P. Relations

When the U.S. declared its "war on terrorism" after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Arroyo came forward as the first Asian leader to openly declare her support. The Philippines offered its military facilities at the former Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base for U.S. troops deployed for war in Afghanistan. In return, Washington pledged to grant Manila U.S.\$100 million in development aid and another U.S.\$55 million for the country's anti-terrorism campaign, which was welcomed by the Philippines' military establishment.

Moreover, within the framework of the joint R.P.-U.S. bilateral military training exercises, codenamed-Balikatan 02 (shoulder-to-shoulder), some 1,500 American soldiers have engaged in anti-terrorism training with their Filipino counterparts. The training included the use of state-of-the art military equipment and communications facilities to improve the inter-operability of Philippine and U.S. troops against terrorists. For 6 months from January 2002, 660-800 soldiers of the U.S. Special Forces were also stationed in the island of Basilan, a remote province in Southern Philippines (Mindanao), to help the Philippine military pursue members of the militant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which has been put on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

The joint training exercises have had mixed results. The presence of U.S. troops has helped in the rescue of an American kidnap victim held by the Abu Sayyaf for more than a

year, but has not resulted in more dead or captured terrorists.

The U.S.-planned military attack on Iraq has also stirred mixed responses in the Philippines. Manila announced that it would allow American warplanes and vessels to land, dock, refuel and fly over the Philippines. The offer was said to be in line with the Philippines' commitment to the global anti-terrorism war authorised by the UN Security Council following the 9/11 attacks on the United States. However, following the announcement of this policy, the Arroyo administration found itself having to revise its position. Its most recent pronouncement was that the Philippines would consider allowing American planes to use its air space only "for humanitarian purposes", and only if the UN Security Council supported the U.S. action.

Domestic Responses

The new phase of U.S.-R.P. relations, particularly the bilateral cooperation to fight terrorism brings to the fore both the old – and new tensions – that have riddled this relationship, as displayed in the domestic debate over the government's offer of support for the U.S.-planned attack on Iraq. The Arroyo administration came under severe criticisms from many fronts for its perceived "blatant and solicitous" support for the U.S. belligerent and unilateralist stance. Minority Senate leader, Aquilino Pimentel, urged the government to be more prudent and await a UN resolution on this matter. Several opposition leaders, political commentators, civil society groups have joined in cautioning the government on the consequences of its close alliance with the U.S.

Among the reasons cited in opposing open support for U.S. military attack on Iraq and use of Philippine airspace:

1. The tremendous impact the war would have on the 1.4 million documented overseas Filipino workers employed in the Middle East. Repatriating overseas contract workers, in case of a full-scale war breaking out between the U.S. and Iraq, would cost the Philippine government an estimated P8.6 billion (U.S.\$ 162 million). It is estimated that remittances from overseas contract workers make up 10% of the country's GDP.
2. The impact on the Philippines' oil supply. The country imports most of its oil supplies for manufacturing and other major industries.
3. The possible spill-over effects of the Iraqi attack on the country's own local Muslim population. These could further endanger the government's on-going peace talks with the two Muslim secessionist groups: the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

An analysis of the undercurrents of the U.S.- R.P. relations cooperation in the war on terrorism must include related issues in the current dilemma the government faces with regard to the U.S.- Iraq confrontation.

First, is the concern that the U.S.-R.P. efforts at combating terrorism in the Philippines would endanger the prospects for peace between the government and the Muslim secessionist groups. Both the MNLF and MILF have accused the past and present administrations in Manila of lacking sincerity in arriving at a political solution to their

demands. Further, the military offensive conducted against the MILF in July 2000 did not help the realisation of the 1996 Peace Agreement. Past Philippine presidents had outlined a comprehensive plan to resolve the problems of Muslim separatism. These consisted of policies and programmes that simultaneously address the political, socio-economic and security aspects of the problems in Muslim Mindanao. President Arroyo had followed up on this with her own 14-Point Plan. In this regard, the R.P.-U.S. Balikatan exercises caused some consternation among Muslim groups who perceived these counter-terrorism operations as directed not only at the ASG groups but also themselves.

Second, and closely linked to the above is the impact on the country's long drawn-war against the communist or communist-inspired insurgency. The New People's Army of Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP/NPA) has been one of the most serious security threats that the country has faced since its independence in 1946. The CPP/NPA's struggle has been historically rooted in the so-called "unfinished revolution" of the masses, peasants and workers against colonial and neo-colonial exploitation – meaning the Americans. The CPP/NPA has always accused the Manila government of being a "puppet" of America and through its political arm – The National Democratic Front (NDF) – has strongly objected to the presence of American troops in the country, even after the closure of American bases in 1991. With the current revival of U.S.-R.P. relations, the CPP/NPA has branded the bilateral cooperation on terrorism as a "Trojan horse" to allow U.S. military installations back into the country. Moreover, the U.S. announcement that the CPP/NPA has been included in their list of terrorist organizations has only fanned its anger and caused it to threaten to blow-up American installations in the country.

Third, (and not least) are the issues of national sovereignty and the (un)constitutionality of the presence of American troops in the Philippines. Opposition parties, student activists, militant labour groups, certain civil society groups, to name just a few, have again voiced this common refrain – "No" to U.S. military presence in the country. This was one of the reasons why the country's Vice President, Teofisto Guingona, resigned from his concurrent post as Secretary of Foreign Affairs in July 2002. The Arroyo administration found itself being confronted with issues of constitutional boundaries and the need for the Philippine President to seek congressional clearance before she could offer support for U.S. forces involved in an attack on Iraq..

The revitalised U.S.-R.P relations, particularly their bilateral cooperation against terrorism, have certainly opened a Pandora's box of issues in what could otherwise have been seen as a purely alliance equation. This has inadvertently revived old tensions and has added new ones. For instance, in regard to the offer of Philippines airspace in the event of a U.S. military attack on Iraq, the administration found itself being criticised even by outside parties. This resulted in several policy flip-flops. For example, the offer of airspace was withdrawn when Iraq's charge d'affaires in Manila complained that the country's pro-U.S. position was "encouraging war". But this position was subsequently revised. Media reports have noted that the second reversal came after the Asian Wall Street Journal criticised the Philippines for its withdrawal, arguing that it was "an affront to an ally that had earlier sent thousands of troops to the Philippines to help in the fight against homegrown terrorism". What immediately followed was a more nuanced and ambiguous statement that stated that the Philippines was prepared to extend "political, security and humanitarian assistance to the United States in the pursuit of its most vital interest, which coincides with our vital interest, to defeat terrorism".

The flip-flop in policies by the Arroyo government with regard to the U.S reflects the complexity of the security dilemmas confronting the Philippines. In weighing its policy options with regard to the interest of its ally, the U.S., and balancing this against its own war(s) on terrorism and other security threats, the government finds itself embattled against contending forces that threaten to divide the country even further. On the one hand, are the pressures on a sovereign state that is grappling with domestic security challenges coming from several fronts. On the other, are the expectations that come with being a close U.S. ally. Déjà vu indeed except that there is the added dimension of the U.S.-led war on terrorism which impinges on national defence and security policies.

Lest we forget, there are also the significant commitments of being a committed member of a regional body (ASEAN) that favours comprehensive and cooperative security vis a vis collective security and promotes multilateralism as opposed to unilateralism. All these factors compound the security dilemma of the Philippines and highlight the complex yet inseparable dynamics of domestic politics and foreign policy.

* *Dr. Mely Caballero-Anthony is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*