

US, Philippines weigh new military marriage

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COTABATO CITY, Southern Philippines - More than 15 years after the US was forced to close its military bases in the Philippines by nationalist politicians, there are growing indications that Washington is angling to re-establish a permanent military presence here - though US diplomats strenuously deny the speculation.

The United States' behind-the-scenes role in mediating a peace deal between the Philippine government and a group of Islamic rebels and its assistance to the Philippine armed forces in chasing down another rebellious Islamic organization has, for many Filipinos, lent credence to growing speculation that the US has designs on establishing new bases on the country's southern island of Mindanao.

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), an independent, non-partisan institution established and funded by the US Congress, is involved in the negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has been fighting for independence for more than 30 years. The USIP, however, is conspicuously not a party to the broad, Malaysia-led peace talks, which were launched after the two sides signed a tentative truce in July 2003.

The MILF, the largest rebel group in the Philippines, has hinted on several occasions that it has been approached by undisclosed US authorities about the possibility of establishing US military bases in MILF-controlled territory as part of a final peace deal. "This is negotiable, it is possible," said Eid Kabalu, the MILF's spokesperson.

"We are facing reality. We know that Washington has its own agenda in Mindanao, and that this has mostly to do with terrorism," said Kabalu from his modest residence in central Mindanao's Cotabato City. "However, if the American interest is really in pushing this peace process, then we can talk about military bases."

For nearly a century, the US military had use of two major bases in the Philippines, one at Clark Air Force Base and the other at Subic Naval Station, representing for a time the United States' largest military installations in Asia. After the 1986 fall of Philippine dictator and erstwhile US ally Ferdinand Marcos, nationalistic lawmakers in 1991 voted to end the United States' long military presence in the country.

The subsequent US military withdrawal was widely expected to create a regional power vacuum, bringing the Philippines into territorial disputes with Japan, China, Taiwan and Malaysia, particularly over competing claims to the reputedly oil-rich Spratly Islands. Meanwhile, in the late 1990s, the US made overtures to establish permanent military bases in Thailand - which were spurned out of hand.

From the United States' perspective, the concomitant rise of regional Islamic terrorism and China's

growing military ambitions have fundamentally changed the region's security calculus and accentuated the strategic need for new installations in the region. And from a regional perspective, the Philippines is arguably the best fit. The Islamic-rebel-racked southern Philippines has recently emerged as a key theater in the United States' counter-terrorism campaign in Southeast Asia.

The US has in recent years poured hundreds of millions of dollars of military-related assistance into the Philippines, including funds earmarked for military training. The US has also provided technical assistance for the Philippine military's campaign in the southern province of Sulu against the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic rebel organization that Washington contends has links to al-Qaeda.

Strategic motivations

Security analysts in Manila agree that Washington has a strong strategic interest in re-establishing permanent military bases in the Philippines. According to prominent political analyst Antonio Abaya, the short- and mid-term military objective would be to undermine activities of Jemaah Islamiya, the Indonesia-based regional terrorist group that is believed to have training camps in the Philippines' Sulu Archipelago and West Mindanao.

Retired General Fortunato Abat, a former Philippines defense chief and senior envoy to Beijing, contends that establishing a US military base in Mindanao would make strategic sense for Washington on several fronts, including possible future naval interventions in the South China Sea, defending Taiwan from a preemptive Chinese attack and providing a launch pad for anti-terrorist operations in Indonesia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Furthermore, it would complete the US security arc providing additional strength to what the US has in place in Japan, Korea and Hawaii to forestall any Chinese adventurism in Southeast Asia," Abat said.

Writer and historian Renato Redentor Constantino concurs with such assessments, noting that Mindanao is now in the midst of a US-financed infrastructure spending spree that he contends goes well beyond what the region's development would need. "Yes, the US is interested, and no, it is not only because of the war on terror," Constantino said.

Philippine-based US diplomats strongly dismiss such speculation. "There are no talks along those lines. The US is an ally of the Philippines and, at the moment, military bases are not allowed here," Stacy MacTaggart, deputy press attache at the US Embassy in Manila, said in a telephone interview.

Eugene Martin, executive director of the Philippines chapter of the USIP, sounds similar denials. "As the Institute of Peace is not a US government agency, I do not know what and if any discussions on this matter are or have been held. But the institute is not in any way engaged in such talks as we focus on trying to help the two sides reach a viable peace agreement," he said in an e-mail response to Asia Times Online queries.

"Personally, I would be surprised if there were such discussion, since the US military is working closely with its Filipino counterparts on counter-terrorism training," Martin said. "Furthermore, as long as the prospective Bangsamoro homeland is within Philippine territorial boundaries and sovereignty, I believe the national constitutional provisions barring foreign military bases would prevail. Legal scholars and nationalists in Manila would find it difficult to accept such bases."

Sources close to the Philippine-based US intelligence community claim that talks about establishing bases are under way, are spearheaded by a parallel unofficial diplomacy on the ground. "It is an

ongoing discussion. The two parties are close, and Manila has agreed. One big problem is to find a formula that can be sold to the strong local opposition," a source said.

Peaceful latecomer

Washington's strategic interest in the region followed al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attack on the US, when evidence emerged that some of the plot's leaders had held meetings in the Philippines. The US later became militarily active in the region after reports emerged that various Islamic terrorist organizations had taken sanctuary in Mindanao's thick forests, including some groups that had allegedly relocated their camps from Afghanistan after the US invasion of that country in 2001.

Intelligence sources in the Philippines say the Moro rebels welcomed many of the mujahideen fighters, who brought with them weapons and expertise. Then, their relocation was made easy by Manila's incompetence in identifying and combating the new threat, because of weak anti-terror legislation, a tattered intelligence network and a lack of resources and manpower.

The United States' involvement in the region was partly triggered by a direct plea for help made by the late MILF chairman Salamat Hashim, who wrote to US President George W Bush in January 2003. Washington's commitment was partially based on the MILF's pledge to renounce terrorism, which was made public by Hashim in a policy statement released on June 20, 2003. This was followed that same month by a similar request for assistance by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who had by then emerged as Asia's most vocal supporter of the US-led anti-terrorism campaign.

Since then, the US has substantially increased its assistance to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. In the past few years, Washington has poured roughly US\$300 million into the AFP's coffers and sent hundreds of American soldiers to conduct prolonged training exercises with their Filipino counterparts. This May, the Philippines and the US signed a new agreement establishing a formal board that will determine and discuss the possibility of holding joint US-Philippine military exercises against terrorism and other non-traditional security concerns.

The US military presence in and around Mindanao arguably has a more permanent feature in the shape of the Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines, which advises Filipinos on how best to fight terrorism. The JOSTFP, which rotates personnel every six months, is composed of marine, air-force, navy, army, and special-forces personnel, all under the US Pacific Command.

The JOSTFP's main target is the Abu Sayyaf Group, a small but violent rebel organization operating mainly in the Sulu Archipelago that has historically been involved in kidnappings for ransom. The US has since September 11, 2001, included Abu Sayyaf on its list of global terrorist organizations.

The MILF and Manila have optimistically stated their joint intention to sign a final peace agreement by the end of this year. Provisional indications of the deal include a power-sharing governmental system, which would place part of Mindanao under the Moro's direct day-to-day control while at the same time maintaining Philippine national and geographical integrity. The establishment of US military installations would conceptually serve a de facto peacekeeping role between the two sides, while also providing Manila and Washington a valuable beachhead to combat Islamic terror groups in the region.

The MILF's Kabalu said his group would like official US participation in the peace-talks process, which since 2003 has been led inconclusively by Malaysia. "We would like Washington to make its position official, like Malaysia, Brunei and Libya, who take part in the consultations on behalf of their governments." At the moment the US is playing a clever role; they are involved, but only via the

United States Institute of Peace,"he said, adding:"We have nothing against the Americans. As a matter of fact, in our 30-year-long struggle, we have never hurt one American. If they help, then they are welcome."

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