

US military plans for a long-term presence in the Philippines

John Roberts
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When US troops started to arrive in the Philippines in February to extend the Bush administration's "war against terror" into South East Asia the publicly announced terms of the "training exercise" forbade active US involvement in combat missions. The 660 US personnel were to train local troops and leave after six months.

It soon became apparent, however, that the US was playing an operational role in the hunt for an estimated 85 Abu Sayyaf rebels holding three hostages—a US missionary couple Martin and Gracia Burnham and the Filipino nurse Deborah Yap—on the southern island of Basilan. About 160 Special Forces troops are deployed directly on the island itself. Another 500 US support soldiers are based in the city of Zamboanga providing sophisticated surveillance information to the 4,000 Filipino troops hunting Abu Sayyaf guerrillas.

The country's constitution bans the presence of foreign troops on Philippine soil. Moreover, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo expected a political backlash over the return of troops of the former colonial power just a decade after shutting the last US bases—the Subic Bay naval base and Clark Airfield. A constitutional challenge has already been mounted in the Supreme Court and a number of anti-US protests have taken place.

While there has been no admission that they have patrolled with their Philippine counterparts, US troops have been involved in "medical evacuations" and the detailed planning of operations. The official agreement provides for the conduct of field exercises "to improve the operational capacity" of the Philippine army—opening up the possibility of US troops openly joining Philippine soldiers on patrol.

Several articles in the American press have been developing the argument for direct US military

involvement in the hunt for the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. The *Washington Post* on March 27 reported that "Special Forces soldiers squirm under the rules that limit their patrols and require that they fire only in self-defence." The newspaper drew a comparison with Afghanistan where initially US soldiers were tightly constrained in what they could do.

The article then pointedly added: "As in Afghanistan, the US troops will be operating with allies they are not certain they can trust." It cited the comments of a Roman Catholic priest, Cirilo Nacorda, who has caused a scandal in the Philippines over his allegations that local military commanders and officials have accepted bribes in return for permitting the Abu Sayyaf to escape. "The military does not want the Abu Sayyaf to end. The longer it goes on, the more their budgets go up, the more guns and ammunition they can sell the guerillas, the more ransoms they get a cut of," Nacorda said.

The obvious conclusion is that the US troops have to become directly involved in the fighting. And if that takes place the US troops could rapidly become involved in a broader conflict with the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has an estimated 1,000 fighters on Basilan. While the MILF is nominally in peace talks with Arroyo, the negotiations have been protracted and difficult.

The *Washington Post* noted that it would be "hard to distinguish" between Abu Sayyaf and the MILF and the latter has threatened to attack US troops that enter their areas. US Special Forces outpost commander Major John Deedrick is quoted as saying "The primary threat we're concerned about is Abu Sayyaf. But we're concerned about anyone who shows a hostile intent towards the US."

The situation is reminiscent not only of Afghanistan

but Vietnam where initially only Green Beret advisers were sent in the early 1960s to improve the “operational capacity” of the South Vietnamese troops. The failure of the local troops provided the excuse to send in US troops, at first to defend US facilities and not for combat operations. While the US high command may not have a war on the scale of Vietnam in mind, there are growing indications that the Special Forces troops on Basilan are simply the thin end of the wedge for more ambitious plans.

The current operation, code named Balikatan (shoulder to shoulder), was due to conclude on July 15. However according to Philippine and US officials the training had not fully begun by the end of March. The *New York Times* on March 31 quoted a US official as saying: “We’re looking at prolonged training. It takes more to build up capabilities than saying ‘Here are some night vision goggles.’” The official said that no decision had been taken but other press reports indicated that officials on Basilan were preparing for a six-month extension.

On April 7 Philippines Brigadier-General Emmanuel Teodosio announced that the military will recommend that the government approve the deployment of an additional 300 US troops—engineers to carry out non-combat construction work. Teodosio said the plans called for the rebuilding of roads, two seaports, an airstrip and drinking water facilities. “These are massive engineering works so the Americans’ stay should be extended,” he said.

An element of the construction work is a bid to win local support for an extended US stay. The *New York Times* noted: “Part of the mandate of the American forces is to win hearts and minds. American soldiers accompanied by local interpreters are visiting villages with lengthy questionnaires about their needs.” One of the reasons for the emergence of separatist movements in the southern Philippines is the extreme poverty facing the majority Muslim population.

The engineers may be involved in “aid” projects aimed at neutralising local suspicion and hostility to the US presence. The primary purpose of their deployment, however, is military—to improve transport for more effective operations as well as to provide more permanent facilities for US forces. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld noted on April 9 that he was waiting for final approval to send additional troops,

engineers and civil affairs specialists to the Philippines.

If the deployment takes place, there will be approximately 11 US soldiers and 45 Filipino troops for every Abu Sayyaf member suspected of being active on Basilan. If one were to take the original statements of the Philippines and US governments at face value then one would have to conclude that the operation is among the worst planned in military history. The only logical conclusion is that the US military presence is for other purposes.

A *New York Times* article on April 7 touched on Washington’s broader aims. It began by giving vent to the frustrations of the Pentagon over the failure of Filipino troops to secure the release of the Burnhams. The article then went on to note that the fate of the US hostages was not a major concern. “[T]he Americans are not complaining too much... the United States needs the Philippines for the long haul. If the southern Philippines, where Muslim separatists have long operated, can be stabilised, the islands there could make a perfect listening post, and good jumping off point, for guarding the whole range of American interests in the Pacific.”

Just two months after the first US troops entered Basilan, the flimsy façade is quickly being stripped away. The US operation is primarily not about training Filipino troops, freeing the Burnhams or even destroying the Muslim separatist guerrillas. Three decades after the US defeat in Vietnam and a decade after its withdrawal from Subic Bay and Clark Airfield, the Bush administration and the Pentagon are pushing for the Philippines to again become a major US base of operations in South East Asia.



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