

US prepares to extend its military presence in the Philippines

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When the US dispatched more than 1,000 troops to the Philippines earlier this year, both Washington and Manila claimed that the Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder) “training exercise” would last only six months and be completed by July 31. As the deadline approaches, the signs are growing that US soldiers will remain in the country, under one pretext or another, well into the future.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced last week that at least some of the 160 US Special Forces troops, who have been training Philippine soldiers on the southern island of Basilan, will stay. Asked by reporters about the level of US involvement, he commented: “We very likely will continue—not continue, but have some arrangement with respect to operating with somewhat smaller levels.”

On June 20, Rumsfeld gave the green light for the US Special Forces to expand their role and join Philippine troops on small group patrols against Abu Sayyaf guerrillas in southern Mindanao. Previously, the US soldiers had been confined, officially at least, to training and advising at the battalion level at Philippine army bases. Under the current rules of engagement, US soldiers are not permitted to fire their weapons unless in self-defence—a condition that will be all but meaningless if fighting erupts.

The immediate aim of the US military presence was to track down the Abu Sayyaf group that had been holding two American missionaries Martin and Grace Burnham and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap hostage since June last year. Two of the three hostages were killed in a shootout last month between Philippine troops and Abu Sayyaf rebels. With US assistance, the Philippine army has since stepped up its efforts to crush the Islamic separatist group completely.

The dispatch of US troops to the Philippines was widely touted in the international media as the opening of a “second front” in Bush’s “global war on terrorism”.

However, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US simply provided the pretext for Washington to press ahead with long-held plans to reestablish a high-profile military presence in the Philippines and the South East Asian region.

The Bush administration is still maintaining that American troops will be withdrawn by July 31. But a proviso has now been added to the effect that consideration will be given to requests from Manila for US forces to stay longer. That formal request seems almost certain to be made.

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo announced on June 22 that she would ask Washington to allow US forces to stay beyond the end of July. “I already said through his [Bush’s] other officials that while the military training portion will end July 31, we can start the next Balikatan immediately. So by the time July 31 comes, I hope they have the next Balikatan already worked out,” she said.

The dispatch of US troops has been dressed up as a “training exercise” in an attempt to circumvent the Philippine constitution, which prohibits foreign troops from operating in the country. Arroyo is concerned to head off potential opposition to the continued presence of US troops in a country that was an American colony prior to World War II. In the early 1990s, protests forced the US to close its two major military bases in the Philippines—the Subic Bay Naval Base and the Clark Air Field.

Arroyo’s support for an ongoing US military presence has opened up divisions in her administration. In an embarrassing series of events, her office announced on June 27 that Vice President Teofisto Guingona was “relinquishing” his post as foreign minister and that an opposition senator was likely to be offered the job. Just hours later Guingona flatly denied that he had resigned. Last weekend, under pressure, he finally announced his departure before the Congress resumes on July 22.

Arroyo began lobbying for Guingona's removal after he publicly opposed the original plan to station US troops on Basilan. The president convinced him to change his stance but he was likely to oppose any plans for a continued US military presence beyond July 31.

Guingona may be replaced by opposition senator Blas Ople, as part of a deal aimed at breaking the current deadlock in the country's upper house. At present, the government and opposition both have 12 votes in the senate, which could block legislation required strengthening US-Philippine military ties.

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* commented that Guingona's removal could "pave the way for the appointment of opposition Senator Blas Ople as secretary of Foreign Affairs, apparently to break the deadlock in the senate and allow administration senators to regain control of the chamber... [and] avert a new clash between the president and Guingona on another flashpoint foreign policy issue, this time the proposed Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA)..."

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz called on Arroyo to sign the MLSA when he visited the Philippines in early June. The agreement would allow the US to set up storage facilities in the southern Philippines as well as to build roads, airfields and port facilities to access the storage areas. In exchange, Washington has promised a broad range of military assistance to the Philippine armed forces. Wolfowitz said at the time: "I don't want to be presumptuous and tell the government of the Philippines what to do (but) we think the signing of that agreement will allow us to work more closely."

Critics have labelled the agreement a mere rehash of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement that was rejected by the senate in the early 1990s, leading to the closure of the Subic Bay and Clark bases. Bayan Muna Representative Crispin Beltram also criticised the decision to allow US troops to accompany Philippine army patrols. "It's the actual plan all along. The President and her military advisers must have cooked up this strategy of slowly phasing in the US troops during her state visit to the US last November," he said.

The US thinktank Stratfor pointed to the broader strategic significance of the MLSA agreement, stating: "If such a deal is signed—and it is likely that President Arroyo will back it—it would represent more than the creation of a supply dump. Rather, it would be more of a 'contingency dump', a pre-positioning of U.S supplies and fuel in case Washington needs to launch counterterrorism or other military operations in Southeast Asia."

"But a reduced US presence on the ground in Basilan veils Washington's longer term strategic interests in the Philippines, which sits astride the dividing line between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The Philippines is a perfectly located staging ground for any future Al Qaeda-hunting Washington may wish or need to do in Southeast Asia—as well as an important strategic location in case relations with China sour."

In other words, the dispatch of US troops to the Philippines and the establishment of supply depots is to strengthen the US position and defend American strategic and economic interests in the region against its potential rivals—China in particular. As one Pentagon official told the *Washington Post*: "The administration's war on terrorism provided a timely rationale for getting more deeply engaged in the Philippines, which is something Blair [recently retired commander of US military forces in the Pacific] and others wanted to do."

Planning for the next stage of US military involvement in the Philippines is already underway. General Roy Cimatu, Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces, met with Blair's replacement, Admiral Thomas Fargo Commander, last week in Hawaii to discuss the details. A joint press statement released after their meeting on June 27 declared: "Admiral Fargo and General Cimatu discussed the transition from Balikatan 02-1 into a sustained program of security cooperation and counterterrorism training and assistance. Toward that goal, the members agreed upon sustainable plans which will be submitted to their respective governments for consideration."



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