

US prepares further military exercises in the Philippines

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When 1,300 US troops started arriving on Basilan Island in the southern Philippines in February, both Washington and Manila were at pains to declare that their presence was part of a limited training operation designed to enhance the capability of Filipino forces to defeat Abu Sayyaf—a group of armed Islamic separatists.

It was obvious at the time that this was a transparent ruse aimed at sidestepping local political opposition and a constitutional prohibition preventing foreign troops operating on Philippines territory. The Bush administration's immediate aim was to free two American hostages—a missionary couple, Martin and Grace Burnham—in order to register a victory in its “war on terrorism”.

The hostage rescue mission resulted in a shambles. Martin Burnham was killed along with a Filipino hostage. But the longer-term strategic aim behind the deployment of forces remained unaffected. This was what the US media referred to as the second front of the global “war on terror”, in effect the reestablishment of a *de facto* permanent US military presence in the Philippines.

The last of the US troops were supposed to leave the Philippines on July 31. Instead, almost a year after the first units arrived, more than 200 US troops are still in southern Mindanao working on “civic action” and support projects. Under the pretext of helping the impoverished local population, the engineers have been upgrading roads, ports and other infrastructure to provide better access for the military.

Now US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has ordered the US Pacific Command and Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan a further “training” exercise for next year, modeled on the Basilan operation. Under the plan being discussed in Manila and Washington, 150 to 175 US

Special Forces troops would join the 275 soldiers and marines still in the Philippines. Once again the “exercise” would take place in an area of active operations—on Jolo in southern Mindanao where the army has been hunting the Abu Sayyaf—and US soldiers would be allowed to fire in “self-defence” when accompanying Filipino soldiers.

The latest plan, reported in the *New York Times* in early December, differs from one announced in mid-November to train two light rapid reaction companies and four light infantry battalions. According to the *New York Times*, the revised exercise will shift “hundreds of troops scheduled for classroom or routine training in the northern Philippines to a combat zone in the south.” Unlike the earlier Basilan operation, the new exercise will not be limited to six months but, according to a US official, will range “over much of next year”.

There are indications, however, that the US and the Philippines are already considering more far reaching military collaboration. On December 3, Associated Press reported that Washington has drawn up a proposal for the US military to play a “key role in organising, training and arming” a new Philippines strike force to deal with crises in the Philippines as well as being available for UN operations and “any regional and international military response to crisis”.

While a Filipino general claimed that the strike force was still “in a conceptualisation stage”, it suggests, at the very least, that the Pentagon has ambitious proposals for working with the Philippine armed forces, inside and outside the country. According to Associated Press, the creation of the new military unit is linked not only to “a deepening US involvement” in fighting Muslim separatists in the south but also “Marxist” insurgents elsewhere in the country. In August, Washington announced that the Communist Party of

the Philippines and its New Peoples' Army had been placed on the US list of terrorist organisations.

Last month President Arroyo ignored opposition protests and signed the long-mooted Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) that allows the US to use Philippines facilities as a supply centre for its military operations in the region. The two sides circumvented Philippines law and the parliament by declaring the MLSA to be a purely administrative agreement which did not require legislative approval or scrutiny.

Both Filipino and US officials have bent over backwards to downplay the significance of the MLSA. US Ambassador Frank Ricciardone referred to it as "a fairly boring... low level agreement". Foreign Secretary Blas Ople labeled the MLSA as "nothing but administrative and accounting procedures". However, the arrangement is far from routine.

The MLSA allows the US to store ammunition, food, water and fuel and provides US forces with access to support services such as billeting, communications and medical services. The agreement calls for "reciprocal logistic support" between the militaries of the two countries for "approved activity," including "combined exercises and training, operations and other deployments." When asked, Philippine military spokesmen refused to elaborate on the meaning of "other deployments".

Taken as a whole, the Bush administration has, in the space of just 12 months, substantially bolstered the position of the US military in the Philippines. For the last decade, following the closure of the huge Clark Airfield and Subic Bay naval bases in 1992, the US only had a limited military involvement. Now it has established a de facto permanent military presence, with a provision to rapidly expand the Philippines into a major supply base.

The Bush administration's "global war on terrorism" has provided a convenient pretext to advance long-held US ambitions to bolster its position in the Philippines and throughout South East Asia where the US has substantial strategic and economic interests. The Philippines is strategically located to form part of the US military's logistics for operations in Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly as Washington prepares for the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the country could provide a convenient base of operations if the US

decides to increase pressure on China, which Bush has branded as a strategic competitor.

In the face of significant opposition in the Philippines to the return of the US military, Washington has had to proceed cautiously. But the Bush administration has found a willing ally in President Arroyo, who wants a close relationship with Washington to secure US economic assistance and to bolster her standing domestically and in the region. The "war against terrorism" has also provided Arroyo with a convenient excuse to enact a battery of anti-democratic measures against the growing resistance to the impact of her government's program of privatisation and economic restructuring.



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