

Australia signs military pact with the Philippines

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The Australian government has exploited last month's terrorist bomb blasts in Bali to establish closer defence ties in South East Asia, in the Philippines in particular. Under a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to be signed with Manila, significant numbers of Australian troops will be permitted on Philippines territory for the first time, ostensibly for training purposes. Australia will be the only nation apart from the US to be able to do so.

Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill announced plans for the agreement in Manila alongside Philippines Defence Secretary Avelino Cruz on October 18. Hill told the *Australian* that the talks could eventually lead to joint ground troop operations. Until now, Australian-Philippines military cooperation has been limited to small-scale staff and training contact. A handful of Australian police officers have been training Filipinos in bomb site investigation.

Hill said Australian personnel had been invited as observers to the large scale US-Philippines "Balikatan" military exercise in 2006. He hoped that by 2007 Australia would be a full participant. According to Australian media reports, an AP3-C Orion maritime patrol aircraft is to be deployed for surveillance in the Sulu and Celebes seas. Two patrol boats will join it next year. Australian special forces troops will train Filipinos in long-range reconnaissance tactics.

Australian Strategic Policy Institute analyst Aldo Borgu told the *Australian* that the SOFA represented a "ramping up of Australia's involvement" with the Philippines. "Operational roles for the air force and the navy would be one thing, deploying troops on the ground even at the request of Manila would be beyond anything we've conceived so far."

Hill justified the SOFA agreement by referring to the need for regional anti-terrorist cooperation. Repeating

unsubstantiated claims that Muslim separatists groups in the southern Philippines had trained the Bali bombers, he declared: "[W]e have a real and vested interest to working with the Philippines to overcome the threat. There's quite a lot we could do with a SOFA."

However, Canberra's military ties with the Philippines are bound up with broader Australian economic and strategic interests in the region and above all, with the Australian alliance with the US. Washington regards the country as a vital strategic asset, sitting astride key Asian shipping lanes and in close proximity to China. The US was compelled, however, to abandon its major bases at Subic Bay and the Clark Airfield in 1992.

Since September 11 2001, the Bush administration has used the "war on terrorism" to reestablish a military presence in the Philippines and to reach new military ties. Despite the support of President Gloria Arroyo, opposition emerged to the stationing of US troops in the Philippines, which flouts a constitutional ban on the presence of foreign military on Philippine soil. While US "advisers" operate in the southern Philippines, Arroyo was compelled to back away from more extensive joint operations.

There is no doubt that one aim of the SOFA agreement with Australia is to "internationalise" joint military exercises and blunt opposition to the US presence. Not surprisingly, Matthew Lussenhop, a spokesman for the US Embassy in Manila, immediately endorsed the new pact, declaring: "More cooperation among partners in fighting terrorism is a good thing." He added, somewhat disingenuously, that it was a matter for the Philippines and Australia to decide what kind of training would be provided.

Opposition figures in the Philippines certainly regard

the SOFA agreement with Australia as a dangerous ploy. Opposition politician Teodoro Casino said it would “open the door for direct military intervention”. He called for a Congressional inquiry. Manila is also considering similar military pacts with Malaysia and Singapore, two other close US allies in the region.

Once again, the Howard government is moving lockstep with the Bush administration. Australia was the only country other than Britain to provide military forces for the illegal US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Prime Minister John Howard calculated that Australian support for US militarism was the necessary downpayment for Washington’s backing for the interests of Australian imperialism in the Asia Pacific region.

In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq invasion, the Howard government mounted its own military intervention in the Solomon Islands. On the pretext of preventing “a failed state” becoming a haven for international terrorism and crime, Australian officials effectively took over the running of the small country. Since then, Canberra has aggressively imposed its demands for “good governance” in one Pacific Island nation after another.

Under the guise of anti-terrorist training exercises, American surveillance aircraft, special forces helicopters, engineers and “observers” have been involved in operations in Mindanao and a command, control and intelligence centre has been set up in the area. By joining the US military operations, Canberra is hoping to further cement the US-Australian alliance and also reap extra economic and political benefits in South East Asia.

The Australian military may already be involved. On October 9, the *Australian* cited an unnamed former Australian Security Intelligence Organisation officer, who claimed that Australian special forces have been involved in covert operations in Mindanao for a year. Manila denied the reports. On October 14, however, Australian special forces commander Major General Mike Hindmarsh turned up in the southern city of Zamboanga to the briefed on operations against two suspected Bali bomb makers hiding out in the area.

As well as defence ties, the Howard government is keen to pursue closer economic and political links with the Philippines. The Arroyo administration has backed Canberra’s call for a free trade agreement between

Australia, New Zealand and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It also agreed to support Australian participation in the first East Asia Summit due to be held in Kuala Lumpur in December.

In terms of merchandise trade, the Philippines is only Australia’s 27th largest partner. Bilateral trade amounted to just \$A1.767 billion (\$US1.312 billion) in 2003. But Australian companies see the potential for lucrative investments in mining projects to provide raw materials to China and are anxious to cut out their rivals. A meeting of trade and foreign ministers from Australia and the Philippines in Sydney in August declared that “Australian mining companies were well placed to participate in the development of the Philippines mineral resources”.

All of Howard government’s ambitions are premised on maintaining US backing and thus in supporting Washington’s plans in the Philippines, South East Asia and beyond. None of this has anything to do with lessening the risk of terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. In fact by collaborating in US military plans in the Philippines, Canberra will only further inflame anti-Western sentiment in South East Asia and heighten the dangers.



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