

# The Philippines: America's New Launchpad for the Militarization of Southeast Asia

Aquino promoting ties of dependency with U.S.?

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-The recent visits of high U.S. officials in the Philippines signal a continuing interest in the country in the context of America's geo-strategic interests in the region and the rest of the world. The underlying framework of these objectives is chiseled in U.S. President Barack Obama's National Security Strategy (NSS, May 2010) and the U.S. military's new counter-insurgency (COIN) guide of January 2009. Although both doctrines reiterate the need to maintain the superpower's access to world resources especially oil and other energy materials, they also stress America's right to pre-emptive and unilateral strikes against "terrorism," rogue regimes, and emerging powers, such as China, seeking to challenge the U.S.' global power....An increased defense alliance with the U.S. leading to a quiet escalation of its military presence will make the Philippines a pawn in the Pentagon's plan of containment and encirclement of China.

Those who are watching the first 100 days of the new administration can now start focusing their lens on President Benigno S. Aquino III's coming visit to the United States in September - his first major official foreign trip. The decision to make the U.S. as his maiden foreign destination is not only symbolic but will have far-reaching implications not only on foreign policy but also on the so-called special relationship between a former colony and a superpower. In the long run, it will have broad implications on the Filipino people.

Of course, the presidential spokesperson says Aquino III, together with other heads of state, is going to address the United Nations General Assembly when it convenes next month. The more important agenda, however, pertains to the event that will happen at the White House and other meetings with high U.S. officials. The new president will make a courtesy call to the world's most powerful leader - a traditional ritual performed by the Philippines' past presidents from Manuel Quezon to Ferdinand Marcos and until recently, Gloria M. Arroyo who made several visits to Washington, DC.

A meeting with the U.S. president will underscore the importance given by the Philippine

government to “special ties” with a former colonial master. But these “special ties” have nothing to do with people-to-people friendly relations. These ties have been shaped largely by economic and military considerations that were proven to be inimical to the Filipino people’s sovereign and territorial rights even if being friendly with Uncle Sam guaranteed support for any sitting Philippine president.

In the post-World War II era official visits by Philippine presidents to the U.S. embodied the country’s commitments to onerous economic and defense agreements that laid the foundations of an unequal neo-colonial relationship between the two countries. Time was when the Philippines had to undergo economic reconstruction as a result of the destruction wrought by the war between the U.S. and Japan yet American rehabilitation funds were tied to extending parity rights to Americans, allowing the stay of U.S. military bases and supporting wars of aggression in Korea, Indochina, and elsewhere.

Ferdinand E. Marcos was propped up by the U.S. as America’s spokesman in Southeast Asia when the U.S. needed a coalition of forces from the region to support its wars of aggression in Indochina. Marcos played the role of America’s mouthpiece so well that his dictatorship lasted long enough thanks to continued U.S. support. The Americans dumped him when he became a liability and built up Corazon C. Aquino as the “third force” for succession.

As a president, Aquino backed the renewal of the U.S. military bases and unleashed a U.S.-inspired “total war” policy against rebels leading to more human rights violations.

## **Bush regime**

During the Bush regime, Mrs. Arroyo paid several visits to Washington, DC where she also met Pentagon and Congress leaders. The numerous agreements that she forged – most of them confidential – led to the Philippines playing the role as America’s “second front” against terrorism thus paving the entry of U.S. forces and military installations in the guise of war exercises and special trainings. Since 2001 the increase of U.S. military aid and intervention led to the escalation of extra-judicial killings and other war crimes amid the intensification of Arroyo’s counter-insurgency campaign against the Left, whether armed or unarmed. Yet, despite the financial commitments made by the U.S. government Arroyo’s nine-year presidency saw the highest unemployment rate in 50 years, widening income disparities, corruption, election fraud, plunder, and political repression.

In late May this year when the results of the presidential race had yet to be completed the U.S. ambassador to Manila, Harry Thomas, Jr., was the first foreign envoy to congratulate Aquino III. Their talks at Times Street touched on continued U.S. support, special ties between the two countries, and an invitation for an early state visit by the president-apparent.

The Times Street talks have been followed by high-level meetings with U.S. state department officials led by Secretary Hillary Clinton, a new military assistance package, an offer of a missiles and war aircraft sale, and port calls by warships from the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM). This week, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) announced the release of \$434 million to fund three projects in the Philippines for five years. The MCC board is chaired also by Clinton.

In reciprocity, Aquino III said he is looking forward to the U.S. visit with an upbeat expectation of bringing “gifts” back to the country.

## **America's current interest**

Begging an immediate answer is what America's current interest is in the Aquino III presidency and what possible "commitments" are on the table to emphasize the two countries' "historic ties." The lingering economic recession, increasing unemployment, and budget cuts or streamlining in the U.S. raise questions how much economic or military assistance is left that can be given to the Philippines and other countries – and in exchange for what.

The recent visits of high U.S. officials in the Philippines signal a continuing interest in the country in the context of America's geo-strategic interests in the region and the rest of the world. The underlying framework of these objectives is chiseled in U.S. President Barack Obama's National Security Strategy (NSS, May 2010) and the U.S. military's new counter-insurgency (COIN) guide of January 2009. Although both doctrines reiterate the need to maintain the superpower's access to world resources especially oil and other energy materials, they also stress America's right to pre-emptive and unilateral strikes against "terrorism," rogue regimes, and emerging powers, such as China, seeking to challenge the U.S.' global power.

Recently, Obama secretly deployed new special operations forces (SOFs) to the Philippines and 69 other countries. The deployment is in line with the NSS and the new COIN which essentially continues U.S. counter-insurgency programs in as many countries especially in "failed (or weak) states" and in partnership with host governments and their armies. COIN, however, gives equal emphasis on the use of civilian components such as humanitarian missions; engaging NGOs, civil society, and diaspora communities; and an increasing role of the USAID and other agencies to promote "governance, transparency, the rule of law, and anti-corruption". Not that both papers believe in democracy per se but they see the imperative of maintaining political stability and the elimination of "rogue enemies" as vital to U.S. imperial global interests.

Under Arroyo, the U.S. succeeded in inserting its forces and military outposts in the Philippines particularly in Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Zamboanga. The U.S. claims that the Philippines, particularly Mindanao, is part of the "arch of instability" in Southeast Asia and the rest of East Asia where America's strategic oil and other commodities pass through the South China Sea. China's irredentist claim over the sea is now being contested by the U.S. which considers it as an "open territory".

## **Consistent**

There is no question that Aquino III will remain consistent with the traditional support for U.S. military presence in the country and the whole region. Likewise, he has made it clear that he supports the controversial Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and has continued the Mrs. Arroyo's U.S.-backed counter-insurgency campaign despite the fact that it has led to the killing of activists and other atrocities.

Influential rightist think tanks in the U.S., particularly the Heritage Foundation, are pressing Obama to continue supporting the AFP's modernization program with bigger funds. The modernization assistance is being geared toward upgrading the Philippines' territorial defense especially over the Spratly islands which are claimed by China and other countries.

An increased defense alliance with the U.S. leading to a quiet escalation of its military

presence will make the Philippines a pawn in the Pentagon's plan of containment and encirclement of China. If Aquino III makes the mistake of succumbing to this pressure, he runs the risk of antagonizing Beijing's trade ties with Manila and its growing investments in mining, electronics, and other industries. It could provoke retaliation from China in the disputed Spratly islands.

The U.S. government's strategic military operations in the Philippines in the guise of fighting terrorism are driven by America's war industries that are supported by big defense spending in the midst of recession. In the U.S. recession the only prospects of recovery and employment are provided by Boeing, and other corporations involved in the war industry. The presence of U.S. forces in the Philippines and elsewhere in the world has been profitable to engineering, construction, electronics, aircraft, shipping, and other war manufacturing corporations in the U.S. Globally, U.S. forces and installations along with wars of intervention that are raging in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other flashpoints help sustain the powerful military-industrial complex in the U.S.

When Aquino III goes to Washington, DC his commitment of support for continued U.S. military operations in the Philippines will also be a tacit promotion of the war industries that market weapons of mass destruction and wars of intervention in the world. Such pledge of support is expected to reap financial and military assistance for the new administration but it will also bind Aquino III - like past Philippine presidents - to a master-slave relationship.

The Philippine government's exclusivist ties with America have continually jeopardized not only potentially productive ties with other countries but also deepened the country's neo-colonial, superior-subordinate bondage to its former colonial master. In fact, the continued U.S. influence in the Philippine presidency has deprived the Filipino people of their sovereign right to self-determination, to non-intervention by a foreign country, while bitter economic pills are imposed by U.S.-influenced multilateral agencies. This relationship also helps sustain U.S. meddling in counter-insurgency operations turning the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) into a surrogate army of the Pentagon and a power broker of sorts insofar as the Philippine presidency is concerned.

Aquino III the presidential contender had promised change in the system of governance. What is unfolding as far as dealing with the U.S. is concerned may exactly be the opposite.

There is thus a compelling reason for patriotic forces in the Philippines, including progressive elements in Congress, to call for the abrogation of the VFA and other onerous agreements with the U.S. and an end to U.S. military presence. The overarching imperative is to work for an independent Philippine foreign policy as an important element of governance.

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