

The Continuing Struggle for Philippine Sovereignty: A New Turn

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The post-EDSA era has witnessed a heightened struggle for Philippine sovereignty. Nothing is more indicative of this turning point than the rejection by the Philippine Senate of the RP-US base treaty in 1991 in dramatic fashion. Despite this historic gain, the struggle continues as the United States insists on having military presence in Philippine soil. In 1992, an access agreement was entered into by the U.S. Navy's Pacific High Command and the Philippine military, giving the U.S. Armed Forces access to Philippine ports, airfields and military installations. It was at this juncture that public opposition to such access policy gained momentum. Evidently not contented, the United States in November 1994 sought to forge an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) but only to face more indignant protest from the Philippine Congress, the press, anti-bases groups and other sectors. From their experience over the past decade in their crusade against eternal aggression, the Filipino people have learned many lessons and undoubtedly translated them into potent actions.

In September 1991, members of the Philippine Senate defeated a treaty to renew the U.S. military bases, ridding their country of military occupation by a foreign power for the first time in over 400 years, beginning with Spain in 1565 and ending with the United States in 1991.

A historic gain for Philippine national sovereignty was the loss of a long-held military advantage for the United States. Ever since its war of conquest, the U.S. government had used a military presence in the Philippines as a springboard for intervention in the Asia-Pacific region: China in 1900, Soviet Siberia in 1918, Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War and, most recently, the Persian Gulf.

After Saddam Hussein's defeat, the Pentagon set the goal of a capability to fight two major regional conflicts at the same time, projected for the Mideast and Korea. As previous experience indicated, a U.S. military presence in the Philippines would be pivotal to U.S. intervention in both areas. The Philippine Senate's vote was, therefore, unacceptable to the Pentagon, and that body set about an attempt to undo its results.

In November 1992 at a meeting of a Mutual Defense Board, the U.S. Navy's Pacific High Command made an agreement with the Philippine military that gave U.S. armed forces access to Philippine ports, airfields,

and military installations—for port visits, air transit, and small unit exercises (*Daily Globe*, Manila, 7 November 1992). In the 1980s, the Pentagon had developed access policy in the Mideast where Muslim nationalism made U.S. bases inexpedient (Gerson and Birchard 1991, 286). By 1992, it had 38 such agreements mainly in the Third World (Staff, Arms and Control and Foreign Policy Caucus 1991, 1-2).

Concluding this agreement, U.S. officials said it would permit the U.S. military to continue to use Philippine facilities in a fairly liberal manner without having to go through another crisis with the Philippine legislature” (Shannon 1992). Not surprisingly, it was on this very point that the Philippine opposition to U.S. access policy first developed. Individuals and organizations formerly prominent in the anti-bases struggle, like Senator Wigberto Tanada and the Nuclear Free Philippines Coalition, denounced the access agreement as unconstitutional since it allowed for the presence of foreign troops in the Philippines, a prerogative given by the 1987 Constitution to the Senate alone. This constitution also forbids the presence of nuclear weapons in Philippine territory or waters. Since the U.S. government refused to confirm or deny the presence of nuclear arms on U.S. naval vessels, access opponents declared such port visits unconstitutional.

U.S. officials expressed satisfaction with access, but said they believed the United States might eventually win a broader agreement (Shannon 1992). U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte announced this in November 1994 when he told the Manila press that U.S. warships would soon be repaired and supplied in Philippine ports under an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). Negroponte said President Clinton, on his forthcoming visit, would discuss this new agreement with President Ramos (*Manila Times*, 11 November 1994).

In late October, Thailand refused a Pentagon request to station six ships loaded with heavy material in Thai waters, in a form of access known as prepositioning. When Winston Lord, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, in an interview on Clinton’s Philippine visit, said the U.S. had other options for such prepositioning (*Manila Bulletin*, 6 November 1994), speculation arose in the Manila press that Clinton would propose prepositioning to Ramos on his visit. A tumult of protest resulted. The *Philippine Star* of 12 November reported the Senate unanimous in opposition, and anti-bases organizations spoke out, as did editors and

columnists. U.S. and Philippine officials quickly denied such as proposal was in the offing, but opposition to propositioning ignited, merged with and heightened opposition to ACSA; it became, broader, more intense than that caused by access, casting a shadow on Clinton's visit.

A few days after the visit, a second wave of protest broke out when the *Manila Times* of 25 November printed a draft of the agreement. This committed the Philippine military to provide the U.S. military with the "Logistics Support, Supplies and Services" formally offered by U.S. military base personnel (food, billeting, transportation, petroleum, communications services, medical services, repair and maintenance services, in a long list of such items).

The Philippine military was to provide these services when the U.S. armed forces were at peace and when they were at war. A Mutual Defense Treaty (set up in 1951 to counter a perceived Soviet threat) called on each country to come to the defense of the other in case of attack by a third party. The draft declared that ACSA operated under this mandate. Promising to drag the Philippines into a war not of its own choosing, this provision of the draft gave the opposition a new impetus, causing members of the House of Representatives to take the position of resistance already occupied by members of the Senate (*Manila Times*, 26 November 1994).

Announcing ACSA, Ambassador Negroponte had declared it would be ratified at a meeting of the Mutual Defense Board on 15 December 1994. After the meeting took place, however, the *Manila Times* of 17 December reported about ACSA: "Sources said members of the MOB agreed not to discuss it until controversy over the proposed accord passes." A year later, and after several meetings of the Board, ACSA had still not been ratified.

To give emphasis to a warning that the Mutual Defense board might still ratify ACSA at its meeting in mid-January 1996, Roland Simbulan, chair of the Nuclear Free Philippines Coalition, recalled the Pentagon was considering the use of 22 commercial ports in the Philippines to service ships and provide "rest and recreation" (a term that has covered the prostitution of Philippine women by U.S. military personnel). This meant, said Simbulan, under ACSA the entire Philippines could be a U.S. base (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 January 1996).

Evidently, however, the January meeting again failed to ratify ACSA. On 2 February Abby Tan wrote the Christian Science Monitor from Manila: "Attempts by the government to sign a commercial agreement to allow U.S. ships to repair and refuel at local ports have been shot down by politicians and anti-base groups."

While the failure of the Mutual Defense Board to ratify ACSA reflects the strength of public opposition, Abby Tan's assessment must be qualified. Under the 1992 access agreement, U.S. military exercises have been taking place on Philippine soil, as have port visits by U.S. warships. From February through September 1995, for example, 10 U.S. ships made such visits, only one, evidently, for supplies, two for rest and recreation (Nuclear Free Philippines Coalition, no date).

Secondly, ACSA is an executive agreement (like access agreements generally). Both Ramos and Clinton testified to its existence at a joint 1994 press conference in Manila by favorable references, especially Ramos' remarks about the "re-watering, refueling and minor repairs, and rest and recreation" involved in servicing, which, the Philippine leader said, "is already being done" (Ramos and Clinton 1994). Public protest seems so far to have checked ACSA's ratification by the Mutual Defense Board and the extensive provision of supplies and repairs to U.S. warships. The Pentagon, however, will certainly keep pressing for fuller implementation.

Abby Tan's reference to the Philippine government's support of ACSA needs no qualification, especially with respect to President Ramos. He has given unbroken support to ACSA and the policy it represents: endorsing access in his presidential campaign of 1992, welcoming in person the first return of U.S. soldiers to Philippine soil under access in 1993. He said prepositioning was not germane in 1994, but did not close the door to it in the future. In 1995, when Admiral Macke, then commander of the U.S. Pacific fleet, announced the Pentagon was seeking new Philippine ports for ship visits and military exercises, he reported President Ramos "very strongly supports the ship visits throughout the Philippines" (*Philippine News*, San Francisco, 4 July 1995).

From the very beginning, Ramos' complicity in access and ACSA had been reminiscent of Marcos and the bases. But in January 1996 President Ramos' political behavior brought with it a sense of recall that was uncanny in its shadow exactitude. He did this by re-asserting what Ferdinand Marcos

had so clearly established before him: the connection in Philippine affairs between support for a U.S. military presence and support for political repression. In this month Ramos proposed a bill, purportedly aimed at Muslim terrorists, that allowed the Philippine government to tap phones, detain suspects for three days without a warrant, and pry into private bank accounts (Tiglao 1996). (During this same period – January to early February 1996 – President Ramos' former colleague in the administration of martial law, Senator Juan Ponce Enrile, joined him in support of ACSA and repressive anti-terrorist legislation.) With the Pentagon's support of access and ACSA already on record as repeating Washington's support for the bases, Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord, now came forward, in a courtesy call at Malacañang, to tell President Ramos, with reference to his anti-terrorist bill "We're behind you all the way" (*Philippine News*, San Francisco, week of 31 January 31-6 February 1996). This enthusiastic echo of Washington's support for martial law completed the picture.¹

A storm of public opposition greeted the Ramos anti-terrorist legislation, including that from a bloc of Senators led by Edgardo Angara. Senate minority leader, who said the proposals smacked of Marcos-style efforts to institutionalize "virtual martial law" and help Ramos stay in power (Tiglao 1996). The press was loud in protest, and thousands of Filipinos, including members of Catholic religious orders, took to the streets to show their displeasure.

Ramos' efforts to promote ACSA and the repressive measure both received strong opposition, with even more decisive results in the latter case: the legislation was dropped. In January 1996, with the continuing failure of the Mutual Defense Board to ratify ACSA and the defeat of the repressive anti-terrorist legislation, Philippine politics seemed to take a decisive turn. In this month, there was a conjunction of the Philippine struggle for national sovereignty and democratic rights. This had happened before in the years Filipinos combined opposition to the U.S. bases with opposition to martial law. What was new this time, however, was that instead of gathering forces to oust the dictatorship and the U.S. military presence, Filipinos busied themselves to prevent the return of both, repetition on a higher plane, so to speak.

The experience of the Philippine people over the past decades and the lessons they drew from it made the difference. After a bitter struggle against the Marcos dictatorship, after seeing Washington support that

dictatorship especially because of the bases, after the People Power revolution and the defeat of the bases, Filipinos proved themselves unwilling to countenance a return of repressive rule, a return of a U.S. military presence, (each of which had strengthened the other). This new development seemed to hammer in the gains of the People Power revolution and the defeat of the bases, indicating, perhaps definitively, that, despite a few who may try to turn the clock back, the new era in Philippine politics is here to stay – opening the way to struggle with the underlying problems of poverty and injustice. ❁

Note

- 1 Later on, leaving the warm collegiality of Malacañang Palace only to encounter the chill of public opinion, Secretary Lord moderated his enthusiasm. Now he said such anti terrorist legislation could be supported only if it did not infringe on human rights.

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