

## A Doubtful Strategy

THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT IS following a strategy in the on-going bases review negotiations that is probably not only less than viable but less than honorable as well.

In broadest terms, the Philippine approach to the negotiations appears to be directed at squeezing maximum "rent" from the Americans while postponing a final decision on the life of the military facilities for as long as possible. The Americans are expected to play dumb and cough up billions for the few remaining years of the standing agreement without any explicit guarantee of extension. The Philippines is maintaining an "options open" policy until sometime near the expiry date of the bases contract.

In a sense, pragmatism dictates the "options open" policy. A definite stand for or against the retention of the bases shall be politically explosive either way. The Aquino government clearly feels that entertaining a divisive political debate at this time is unwarranted. A definite stand on the retention issue shall, either way, serve to undermine the negotiating position of the Philippine panel on the matter of compensation.

The Americans are not likely to raise the compensation package when they are sure the bases would be retained anyway; nor are they bound to raise it when they are sure the bases would be phased out regardless of the "rent" paid during the remaining years. It is only by keeping the US in the dark on the final fate of their bases can the Philippine government hope to keep the superpower on the defensive, at least on the negotiating table.

The US is not about to keep idle while the Philippine plays out its bluffing game. The Embassy has mounted an aggressive campaign aimed at creating public opinion favorable to the bases. They have magnified the "external threat" factor. They are trying to pool other Southeast Asian governments to put collective pressure on the Philippines. Playing with their own bluff, they

have publicized their search for "alternative sites" to move their mammoth military facilities.

It is not unlikely that the US, when it finds it necessary, would manipulate domestic political conditions, raise the stakes in this poker game and make the retention of the bases a matter of political survival for this government.

Meanwhile, the Aquino government may find it difficult to keep a handle on the level of national debate on this issue. The Soviets and the Vietnamese have joined in the fray, downgrading the military significance of the Cam Ranh Bay facilities.

The nationalist posturings of Foreign Affairs Secretary Manglapus have so far been addressed to foreign audiences. Externally directed, nationalist rhetorics strengthen the negotiating hand of the Philippines. But care must be taken in keeping these rhetorics from firing the imagination of the masses. Such an eventuality could force the government into a conclusive position it is unprepared to assume.

Thus, when a popular senator like Estrada took a clear anti-bases position, he alarmed not only the Americans, but the Aquino government as well. With the left opposition and the militant nationalists pressing on the bases issue, the Aquino government may find itself carried by a tide of popular nationalism that could force it into heroic but troublesome stances.

But there is little this government could do short of involving 50 million Filipinos in a conspiracy of modulated nationalism. It has relied on a strategy that rests on bluffing an opponent who knows all the cards. It has tended to depend on tactics that involve top-level maneuvering and grass-roots apathy. It has indeed tried very hard to avoid catalyzing popular opinion so that this nation can *soonest* arrive at a consensus and move with clear conviction.

There is something in the nature of the Aquino government that inhibits it from adopting a more adequate strategy on the bases question, among others.