



PROCEEDINGS

US Military Power and Interests in Asia-Pacific: The Challenges to Human Security and Development

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It is now 13 years since that historic day—September 16, 1991—when the Philippine Senate decided to end the presence of United States (US) military bases on Philippine soil. Yet we now seem to be passing a time warp. No thanks to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) and the *Balikatan* (shouldering the load together) exercises, the Philippines has become one whole US military base. Even the remote island of Batanes and the tropical island of Palawan are now being used as staging areas for the US's so-called war on terrorism.

I can still hear then Senate president Jovito Salonga, who 13 years ago presided over that historic session of the senate when he said, “September 16, 1991 may well be the day when we in the Senate found the soul, the true spirit of this nation because we mustered the courage, and the will to declare an end to foreign military presence in the Philippines.”

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the US military has increasingly turned its attention to the Asia-Pacific region. This attention has been further intensified due to the American campaign against terrorism after September 11, 2001. This began with the war in Afghanistan in Central Asia and Iraq. North Korea is also one of the targets of the US war on terror because of its nuclear weapons program and the security threat it allegedly poses.

The US claims its military presence in the region contributes to Asia's security particularly given the alleged presence of terrorist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah. But there has been widespread global criticism even among the American people over the Bush administration's unilateral actions in conducting the war on terror particularly its war on Iraq despite the lack of United Nation's approval. The continuing failure of the US forces to find the weapons of mass destruction that were the rationale for invading Iraq is raising questions over the American government's real agenda in going to war. There is also the question on what really drives the US military build up in the Asian region. Is it in support of its actions in Iraq or parts of Middle East?

Asia-Pacific has seen the largest concentration of US military power in the world and it encompasses a region with the largest population of the world—spread across the ocean area covering almost half of the globe. There has been no systematic study to determine the impact of the 9/11 events that led to the US war on terror in Asia. If ever, some regional conferences have been held such as the one that led to the formation of the Asian Peace Alliance in September 2002. Initial studies have also been done by individual scholars and academicians but these has been mostly country-based studies rather than done at the regional level.

The outcome, it is argued in this study, is instability, and this represents a major US diplomatic failure undermining US credentials as a champion of democracy and self-determination. The reasons for this failure lies in the exaggeration of Asia's importance to the US and the dominance of the US military establishment in Asian policymaking. There is substantial literature on US policy in Asia written by North Americans and Asians and this study will hopefully provide a guide to some of those writings. It also makes use of US congressional hearings and recent US congressional records where US military objectives have received extensive discussion and where Asians have expressed their point of view. The special contribution of the present study lies in three areas

First, it looks at the impact of US military activities after 9/11 and US's strategic assumptions in Asia. It brings up-to-date works along the lines by Bello, et al. in their book "The American Lake." The analysis focused on economic and political impacts rather than social and cultural developments in Asia. It provides detailed coverage of where the US military impact was most manifest. The benefit of this

approach is a concentration on key interaction namely, between US military concerns and the emerging Asian states and the people's agenda.

Second, the study presses a reexamination of US military and strategic assumptions against the views shared by the US policy makers and many of their critics in Asia and the US that Asia is of a vital strategic military importance to the US. The Pentagon has grossly exaggerated the significance of Asia to US security and this has helped legitimate the opportunistic military use of the Asian countries. US military projection has been initially justified by the doctrine of strategic denial—the foreclosure of Asian countries to military usage by another power.

But Asia was subsequently used for military purposes unrelated to this doctrine and territory was set aside for unrelated US contingency options “in other regions of the world.” This study will hopefully contribute to the comprehensive critique of the US military and strategic assumption in Asia. I do not expect my recommendations to have impact on US policies in Asia but to be used as guide for people's movements struggling for human security and development. Asian self-determination may involve some costs to the US but not on its fundamental security interest which may indeed be furthered by it.

Third, there is an assessment of an ambiguity of local governance in which Asians have comprehensive control of political and economic matters while the US has comprehensive control over security or defense matters in the region. The US can influence regional issues and concerns like in the environmental arena. These ambiguities can be resolved by the US further allowing self-determination and democracy or they could renew conflict between Asian countries and the US.

Let me state at the outset that state terror in Asia has been used to fight what governments unilaterally declared as terror. Wars and counterinsurgency have long been pursued as a strategy against terrorism in Asia and the war on terror has always been made an excuse by states to promote militarist and authoritarian dictatorships supporting Western expansionist strategic and economic objectives. Today, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent declaration by the US of the global war on terror have created a pretext for governments to extend and justify the use of draconian national security laws and measures to suppress movements for democracy and human rights.

In other words, to rollback the democratization process happening in many of the Asian countries. The common feature of such laws and measures, past and present, include:

1. arbitrary detention without charges and trial;
2. criminalization of individuals, groups and communities by labeling them simply as terrorists;
3. undermining of due process;
4. reinforcement of repressive practices including torture by state authorities;
5. restriction to freedom of movement and return to asylum;
6. intensification of all forms of racism and discrimination including those based on gender, caste and religion against migrants, refugees and minorities; and
7. invasion of privacy through activities like increased surveillance.

In responding to perceived threats to national security, the security of individuals, communities and societies are often neglected by the state. There is no mention of the terrorism of poverty which as the World Council of Churches once noted “kills more people than any war.” It is a form of terrorism that is often neglected especially in the present era where neoliberal globalization has worsened the conditions of the already marginalized peoples of the world.

Neoliberal economic policies have resulted in the erosion of the Asian people’s standards of living and created structural inequality, insecurity, tensions and conflicts brought about by the yawning gap between the rich and the poor. Social justice and inequities including state policies that exacerbate poverty, unemployment, landlessness and lack of social services are the number one recruiters and breeding ground for so-called terrorists. Thus, when people face severe threats to livelihood, rights and living standards that have been greatly eroded by the neoliberal globalization and by the way, it used to be colonialism and feudal exploitation their protests and demands especially when voiced by people’s movements are treated as security threats by the state.

The state increases its reliance on use of force through police or armies that inflict violence on the people. The exercise of state violence is even legalized and justified through national security laws that are

meant to establish order as more and more people resist and seek alternatives to the dehumanizing world order resulting from policies and practices of neoliberal globalization. There is a need to widen the democratic space not restrict or shrink it further. In this situation, more democratic space is needed for the expression of grievances. Oftentimes, however, the people's mass organizations, social movements, labor unions, grassroots citizen groups and non-government organizations (NGOs) that articulate people demands and alternative become targets of antiterrorism bills and legislations.

Militarism and the adoption and use of draconian rules and measures as a reaction to people's demands have often been resorted to by the state in the garb of curbing terrorism. The Asia-Pacific region is rich with the history of peoples fighting against colonialism and feudalism being met with this kind of reaction from colonial and postcolonial regimes.

Historically, Western countries and sections of the local elite who have been coopted rely on national security laws to suppress the aspirations of the people. Many of the Asian regions security laws have their origins in colonial emergency powers but these continued to evolve and were adopted by local elites to perpetuate their rule. These laws, like the ones imposed in the Philippines during the American colonial period from 1900-1940 include Brigandage Act and the Sedition Law that targeted freedom fighters and those advocating independence. These pieces of legislations paved the way for the intensified pacification of insurgents resulting in genocide, massacres, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and detentions with or without trials. These national security laws were refined during the postcolonial era where under the Republic of the Philippines the Anti-Sedition Law, which became known as RA 1700, was enacted by the Philippine Congress to deal with subversion and rebellion.

I will not discuss in detail the more contemporary aspect of this antiterrorism laws in the Philippines and in neighboring countries but let me just emphasize that in this era, especially after September 11, there are indications, that in the name of the war on terror, states are again lapsing into authoritarianism and into police states. Many of the Asian countries who are riding on the coattails of the US in the Asian region have launched repressive acts at home and abroad against what they considered to be as terrorist organizations.

What have been the realignment in the US foreign policies and objectives especially after September 11? When the Soviet Union still

existed, Europe was the primary focus of security attention and planning of the US. This was because the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) then was the US's primary economic, military, political rival but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, US gradually shifted its attention from Europe to Asia.

This was because of the rise of the perceived new economic rival—China, as well as the growing economic prominence of the region as a focus of the US for trade and investments. The September 11 attacks on US attributed to al Qaeda and its Asian counterparts or allies served as the rationale for the US to focus its military attention on the region. US economic interests in Asia ensure that the region ranks highly in the US security priorities. But the political volatility ensures that the US has also many security concerns such as, [according to US documents]:

1. threat of international terrorism;
2. uncertainty over where new security threats will arise and the need for the US to be prepared to respond quickly to problems around the world;
3. growing challenge of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction including the threat that these may fall into the hands of terrorists or states hostile to the US and in this the US has in mind Pakistan, India and North Korea; and,
4. advances in technology and so-called asymmetric threats at the hands of potential adversaries which put premium on knowledge, precision, speed, lethality and surprise in the conduct of US military operations.

Let me point out that these concerns can be used to justify US unilateral actions especially with claims that these nations harbor or support terrorists or have weapons of mass destruction. But let me review what are considered to be the four tenets of US defense strategy in Asia:

1. to assure allies and friends by strengthening existing security ties and developing new partnerships;
2. to dissuade military competition by influencing the choices of military competition and experimenting with transformed military forces overseas;

3. to deter aggression and coercion by increasing capabilities for swift military actions with and across critical areas of the region; and,
4. to defeat any adversary if deterrence fails.

In meeting these new security challenges, the US military sees mobility and speed of deployment as key. In the context of this new framework, changes in the defense strategy include [quoting from US officials]:

1. diversified access to overseas bases and facilities which would allow for military presence in areas closer to potential conflict areas and provide a broader array of military options in crisis or conflict;
2. posturing forces overseas that are more flexible and capable of a wide range of expeditionary military operations which will further broaden options and strengthen deterrence; and,
3. promoting greater allied contributions which will make for more durable relationships for US with allies and facilitate allied role in future military operations.

US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz highlighted this new security framework recently. He said at a May 2003 Asian defense conference “US military is putting less emphasis on permanent bases in Asia, instead they will focus more on temporary bases and access to military facilities in order to ensure the quick mobility of troops in US military operations in the region.” Thus the US is considering forging a stronger military presence in such countries as Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, as well as Philippines and Australia. In addition to the increased military presence, the US is also projecting its hegemony in the region through military aid. Now there are several types of military aid:

1. Foreign Military Financing **(FMF)**—credit extended to a foreign government in a fiscal year for the procurement of defense articles and services from the US military or American suppliers;
2. International Military Education and Training **(IMET)**—grants given to allied and friendly

- governments for professional training of military students both at home and overseas;
3. Foreign Military Sales (FMS)—defense articles and services sold to a foreign government; and,
 4. Military Assistance Program (MAP)—amount in dollar of materials and services other than training programmed for a particular country from which the US government does not receive dollar reimbursements

From 1993-2003, all forms of military aids to Asia which has been phased out in favor of foreign military financing have been increasing especially after the Cold War and after September 11. Aside from direct military aid there is also an increase in related aid. The Emergency Support Fund (ESF) is a grant earmarked for economic purposes such as infrastructure and development projects. Although these are not earmarked for military purposes they are seen to free recipient governments budget for military allocations. A new program has been beefed up—the Nuclear Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Antinarcotics, Demining and Related Programs which provide funding in support of a variety of security related foreign policy objectives. Funds go to nuclear nonproliferation, antiterrorism, antinarcotics, demining activities, and a new activity after 2001 which US documents referred to as Small Arms Destruction Program.

Let me just emphasize that US military presence can never be separated from US economic interests and this is clearly spelled out in the Bush administration's September 17, 2002 national security strategy (NSS) document which links global economic development through free trade and free markets with US national security. According to the NSS, "market economies not command and controlled economies with a heavy hand of the government are the best ways to promote prosperity and reduce poverty. Policies that further strengthen market incentives and market institutions are relevant for all economies—industrialized countries, emerging markets and the developing world."

Seen in this context, it is clear that the liberalization of Asian markets is an important part of US security strategy in the region. Asia is indeed vital to US interest because of the economic crisis that is currently gripping this world superpower. At least 800,000 jobs have been lost since November 2002 and more than two million since Bush took office in 2001. The US has an external debt estimated at some US\$2.8 trillion as of 2003 and a balance of payment deficit of at least

US\$500 billion. The US is thus turning to Asian markets in an attempt to alleviate its economic woes. Exports are seen as a way of generating jobs for American workers. According to the US Department of Commerce estimate, US\$1 billion of exports correlate to between 14,325-19,000 American jobs indicating that more than three million jobs are generated by US exports to Asia.

Let me now move to the structure and configuration of US military command in Asia-Pacific. The US currently forward deploys some 100,000 troops in the Asia-Pacific region, the majority of which is based in Japan and South Korea where the US continues to maintain military bases. These troops fall under the US Asia-Pacific Command (US PACOM) with headquarters in Hawaii under the commander-in-chief of the PACOM. The US PACOM commands approximately 300,000 military personnel of all US services—about 1/5 of the total US Armed Forces—in three categories namely: forward deployed, forward based and the continental US area of responsibility, including Asia-Pacific, North Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean encompassing 43 countries in Asia.

The United States sees the Philippines as a good location to restore its military forces in Southeast Asia, in the light of threats from Islamic fundamentalist groups especially emanating from Indonesia and Malaysia, where the US finds it dangerous to deploy US forces. The Philippines is also the gateway of the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf and would therefore be ideal for forward deployed US forces in the Western Pacific.

From the 1900s to 1991, the Philippines was the Pentagon's military stronghold in its economic, political and military linchpin in Southeast Asia. The US bases in the Philippines provided important logistical support to US wars in Korea and Vietnam as stated earlier and later, in the gulf in the war against Iraq. The Philippines also served as a regional center for the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) covert operations against Indochina and Indonesia, and against national liberation movements in the region. In fact, for your reference, two years ago, I wrote a brief history of CIA covert operations in the Philippines and you can actually access this in the website.

With the victory of the Filipino people's struggle against US bases in 1991, US military presence shifted to Japan, which became the cornerstone of US' power in the Pacific and adjacent areas, through the US-Japan Security Treaty. In Okinawa, US Marine Expeditionary Units that now train regularly in *Balikatan* Exercises in the Philippines, form the core of today's interventionary forces in the Asia-Pacific, if not the entire world.

In our Asia-Pacific region, US military might is actually the largest land and sea military force overseas of a foreign power. As former US Air Force Pacific General John Lorber bragged in 1995, and I would like to quote when he said, “We the United States, are a Pacific nation where command extends from the West Coast of the United States to the Eastern Coast of Africa and includes both polar extremes. The United States has seven defense treaties worldwide and five of them are in the Pacific region.”

I do not want to discuss further on the US structure in Asia-Pacific, but let me highlight the fact that there have been serious indications as well as moves by the US Armed Forces to look into the possibility of a more active presence in the Philippines, not exactly in the form of a permanent basing structure as it had for several decades but as we are now observing, practically all-year round they have conducted military exercises in various parts of the Philippines.

In addition to its bases and military facilities in other countries, the United States also maintains security alliances with Thailand, Australia and the Philippines, through defense agreements that allow the US troops and military materials to enter their territory and use their facilities. And as I have stated earlier, five of the existing seven worldwide US Mutual Defense Treaties are with the Asia-Pacific countries and these are the following:

1. US-Republic of the Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty
2. ANZUS Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States
3. US-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty
4. Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty; and
5. US-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty.

By year 2000, the US Pacific Command, according to its own documents, had participated in more than 1,500 exercises and other engagement activities in the region alone. Some Asian countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the Central Asian Republics also fall under the US Central Command.

I would just like to mention in brief some of the recent military exercises conducted by the US Pacific Command in the region and these are conducted regularly, like the Team Challenge among Australia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. Another one is referred to as Tandem Thrust between Australia and US forces. The Cobra Gold is

a joint/combined exercise between Thailand and the United States. And of course, there is the *Balikatan* Joint Exercises between the US and the Philippines; the Kin Sword, Kin Edge Exercise between US and Japanese forces; and the Rim of the Pacific Exercises between countries like Canada, Australia, Japan, US, South Korea and the United Kingdom (UK).

I would also like to briefly mention what has been the social movement responses to the US military interest in the region. In recent years, we have seen people's movements in Asia articulate the possibility and desire for human security and genuine development through the common opposition to neoliberal globalization. In fact, many civil society movements in the region are now building transnational solidarity alliances.

The war on terrorism threatens to label any form of dissent as terrorism and is in part an attempt to destroy the capacity of people's movements to achieve social, economic and political reforms. The hollow promise of safety and security has stifled the right to question and articulate the very freedoms and liberties that democratic governments claim to be fighting for are being eroded. Precriminals and preterrorists, even in the United States and overseas, can now be arrested and imprisoned by president Bush's borderless armed forces on the mere suspicion that they are about to commit acts of terrorism. This is a development foreseen, perhaps, by the Spielberg film *Minority Report*, where persons who are perceived to have yet to commit a crime are promptly rounded up.

The US government now refers to its doctrine after September 11 as the "Doctrine of Preemption." But these repressive state policies are being answered by people's concerted and united action in the region. The victory of people's revolutions and uprisings in the Asia-Pacific region in the past decades show that when the state of tyranny is reached, even the most vicious repression using the most advanced technology cannot protect the repressive state.

Many of these so-called antiterrorist and national security measures that have been taken by governments in our region definitely violate international human rights standards. The so-called war on terrorism definitely threatens the very core of democratic nations.

I think I do not have to dwell too much on that aspect but let me just mention that among the countries in the Asia-Pacific, the Philippines has had the longest and most stable security relations with the US, giving the Philippines the image of a US's stronghold in Asia.

In recent years however, the Philippines has also become the Achilles' heel of US military forces in the Asia-Pacific region.

One reason for this, I believe, is no other than the 1987 Philippine Constitution which has incorporated propeace and antinuclear provisions. Some of these provisions that the US and Pentagon is worried about are such provisions like, "The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy; adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation and amity with all nations." This is one of the state policies in the Constitution.

It also states that, "The State shall pursue an independent foreign policy in its relations with other states, the paramount consideration shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination." We also have this provision in Section VIII, "The Philippines, consistent with the national interest, adopts and pursues a policy of freedom from nuclear weapons in its territory."

The other reason, I think, that we are a kind of Achilles' heel for US interest is that some pertinent provisions in our Constitution have institutionalized people's power like in sections on Article XIII, Social Justice and Human Rights, on the role and rights of people's organizations, "The State shall respect the role of independent people's organizations to enable the people to pursue and protect within the democratic framework their legitimate and collective interests and aspirations," and so forth. This Constitution also recognizes the right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political and economic decision making.

Behind the 12 senators who voted to reject the Bases Treaty 13 years ago, on September 16, 1991, was the broad and unified people's movement outside the Philippine Senate. In the end, it was the power of the people that eroded the most visible symbols of our colonial legacy and the Cold War in the Philippines. The anti-treaty movement was forged with the broadest unity possible among organized forces and individuals. September 16 was a great political victory for the Philippine nationalist movement in an arena that is traditionally not its own. The Americans and their statehood advocates were beaten in their own turf.

There will, however, always be Filipino officials who will act as lobbyist for the United States. In those circumstances, there were the Filipino senators and officials in the Aquino government then who

initiated backchanneling talks with the United States. In doing so, they were ready to violate the Philippine Constitution, particularly its prohibition against nuclear weapons and even proposed strategies that would undermine our Constitution.

As a conclusion, let me mention that the US military presence in Asia is not to ensure the security and safety of Asian countries but to project its hegemony in the region. US forces represent an implicit warning to Asian countries to follow American mandated economic policies of trade and investments, that they will not be allowed to chart their autonomous economic course contrary to American economic interests. American military forces in the region also allow the United States to control vital Asian natural resources such as oil fields in the Central Asian Republic. And of course, there are the trade routes in the region especially the routes for the supply of oil from the Middle East.

Thus, the military buildup of the US in Asia cannot be seen outside the phenomenon of economic globalization. The US which has sought to maintain an imperial economic system without formal political controls over the territorial sovereignty of other nations has employed these military bases to exert force against those nations that have sought to break out of the imperial system altogether or that have attempted to chart an independent course that is perceived as threatening to US interest.

The past victories of Asian colonial struggles including those for self-determination in Vietnam and elsewhere, the democratic movements against pro-US dictatorships as in the anti-Marcos dictatorship struggle and the dismantling of the formidable US bases in 1991 in the Philippines, demonstrate the desire of the people of Asia to live in freedom and to run their countries their own way without foreign dictation. At the same time, a strong movement for a nuclear weapons-free and foreign bases-free world has taken shape in Asia and the Pacific in the past decade. Many countries now advocate nuclear disarmament and the establishment of nuclear weapons-free zones of peace as well as the demilitarization and de-nuclearizing the seas and oceans of the region, such as through the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty that was signed on December 15, 1995.

The Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty signed by ASEAN should be given more substance. The Treaty has expressed the organization's determination "to protect the region from environmental pollution and hazards posed by radioactive waste and other radioactive materials and to take concrete action

which will contribute to the process towards general and complete disarmament of nuclear weapons.”

In the Philippines, even after the dismantling of the US bases in 1991, we continue to block any attempt to reestablish US military presence through the VFA or the MLSA. Social movements in the Philippines are doing this by defending and giving substance to the antimilitarist, propeace and antinuclear provisions of the 1987 Philippine Constitution. We are also seeking the abrogation of the Cold War relics—the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and the 1947 Military Assistance Agreement as well as the 1999 VFA.

Our experience in people’s struggles against foreign aggressors and dictatorships in the region show us that only by closing ranks and forging a broad united front can we defeat our militarist adversaries both in the Philippines and Asia.✿

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