Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies 2003 18 (1-2):177-188

PERSPECTIVES

Should the Philippine Government Support Washington's War in Iraq?

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The Philippines has an unwavering commitment to the global war against terrorism and a strong desire to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. As a major non-NATO ally, the Philippine government has expressed preparedness to extend political, security and humanitarian assistance to the United States "in pursuit of its most vital national interest, which coincides with the Philippine's vital interests" to defeat international terrorism.

The US war in Iraq put the Philippines in a difficult situation on whether to yield to a strong anti-war protest from the civil society or to support the US in its desire to change Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The Philippine government earlier announced that it would support the US case against Iraq, but only if the United Nations backs it. The Philippine government said that its support would be in the form of humanitarian assistance and access to ports and other facilities. It even ruled out sending combat troops because of its present preoccupation in the fight against Abu Sayyaf Group, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and the New People's Army.

When the US failed to get the UN approval, the American government acted "alone" to assert its right to self-defense. From the American perspective, Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a "non-deterrable" threat and therefore must be preempted to avoid causing further damage to American interests. Few days after the attack, 54 countries joined the "coalition of the willing" not to mention other countries, which offered conditional support to the US action.

The Philippine government joined the "coalition of the willing" to help realize American strategic objectives in Iraq. It even deported Husham Hussein, an Iraqi diplomat, for his alleged link with the Abu Sayyaf Group. Though the Iraqi Embassy denied the allegation, the Philippine government was firm in its decision to demonstrate its ardent support to the US.

The Philippines joined the "coalition of the willing" for strategic purposes. As a relatively weak and fragile state with ill-equipped and under-trained armed forces facing serious internal security threats and external challenges, the Philippine government had very little choices to assert a more "independent" foreign and security policy. The concept of an "independent" foreign and security policy is more of an aspiration rather than a reality in the Philippines. The security of the Philippine archipelago is heavily dependent on the security of the US and other like-minded states in the region.

Realistically speaking, the Philippines has to be on the side of the US on difficult international issues because it cannot afford at the moment to swim against the tide. Running counter against US positions on international issues like Iraq is a gargantuan risk that the Philippine government cannot confront yet.

It must be recalled that when the Philippines rejected the proposed Philippine-American Treaty of Friendship, Security and Cooperation after the termination of the Military Bases Agreement in 1991, the Philippines seriously suffered the consequences of its action. During the 1990s, the country was marginalized in the American security strategy in Asia. The Philippines lost the military assistance that it used to get during the US bases era. Without the American military assistance, the equipment and facilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) rapidly deteriorated. The Philippine-American security relations hit its lowest point prompting China to take advantage of the situation by asserting its sovereignty over the contested Mischief Reef in 1995. Although the Philippines ventured into force modernization program to enhance its external defense capability, the 1997 Asian financial crisis halted its implementation, accelerating the demoralization of the Filipino soldiers.

When the Philippines extended its full support to the global campaign against terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on America, the Philippines was put again in the radar screen of the US. This reinvigorated the Philippine-American security alliance. The US is presently supporting the Philippines in various

initiatives that aim to increase the capability of the AFP to address various threats to Philippine security, which includes the wiping out of the most dreaded Abu Sayyaf Group. Within the framework of a reinvigorated security alliance, both countries conducted the Joint Defense Assessment, which diagnosed the state of health of the AFP. The US is now deeply involved in putting the AFP back to health.

Candidly speaking, the US remains the cornerstone of Philippine defense diplomacy and the main anchor of our country's security policy. Historical, cultural, economic and geo-political factors have put our country in this current state of affairs. This state of affairs is undeniably sad but true. The Philippines has to value its security alliance with the US because of the imperatives of the present strategic situation. Unless the country eventually develops its own capability to bolster its own security, the Philippines cannot afford to be out of the American security umbrella.

Thus, the Philippine government cannot but support the war on Iraq to be at the side of the US, the world's sole superpower. Being at the side of the US maximizes the near term security needs of the Philippines. But it can also invite potential adversaries in the long term. This is the hard choice that the Philippine government has to face squarely.

To surmount the challenge of American predominance in Philippine security policy, the Philippines has to reform its security sector, which is a very tedious and painful process. Unless the Philippines conducts a serious security sector reform, the American shadow will continue to prevail upon the country.

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Over our Filipino dead bodies. That is how the US and British invaders in Iraq want to sustain their continued occupation of the land that is the cradle of civilization. They want to project an image of legitimacy thru the use of "peacekeeping forces" from other countries in their illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. US allies sending troops to Iraq are like mercenary armies who are being provided US

military assistance and given PX goods privileges in US military commissaries.

With our contingent of 51 Filipino soldiers and policemen in Iraq, why are we assisting in the continued occupation of a country that would not have been brazenly invaded if it were just growing spinach instead of having oil-rich reserves? In addition, an estimated 3,000 Filipino civilian workers are employed in US military installations in Iraq.

Why should we support the US-British occupation army that has destroyed the country, ravaged its economy and continues to be in hot pursuit against Iraqi freedom fighters whom they have tagged as "insurgents" and "terrorists"? A century ago, the same invasion army in Iraq ravaged and occupied the Philippines and with more than 100,000 American troops hunted down Filipino freedom fighters like Apolinario Mabini, General Miguel Malvar, Macario Sakay, Julian Montalan, Francisco Carreon, Leon Villafuerte, among others.

Why should we disrespect the sovereignty of others or extend overseas the disrespect that we have already inflicted on ourselves by inviting US military forces to intervene in our local peace and order problem?

Like the American and British invaders of Iraq, we do not have a real understanding of Middle East geopolitics or why we are getting deeply involved in the war in Iraq. To most Arabs and Muslims, the US-British invasion is a 21st century Crusade by Western powers, and the Anglo-American military bases and installations in the Middle East are like the medieval network of Crusader castles and fortresses on Arab soil. The US-UK invasion strikes some deep chord in Arabs and Muslims especially the occupation of Iraq, the birthplace of Sultan Saladin who defeated the Third Crusade of King Richard the Lion heart. Saladin is the preeminent hero of the Islamic world who defeated the largest Crusader force in the Middle Ages by uniting Arabs, defeated the Crusaders in epic battles, recaptured Jerusalem and threw out European invaders out of Arab lands. Because of these circumstances, we endanger life and limb of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) spread out in the Middle East.

We should not support the US occupation of Iraq because the US invaders and occupiers of Iraq will soon be defeated by the resistance forces of the Iraqi people. There will be a more virulent and united resistance from the Arab peoples in the face of foreign invasion. It will be like the Great Battle of Hattin led by Saladin that won total victory

over the invasion army of Crusaders. When that happens, we would be more consistent with our own nationalist history and Constitution if we were on the side of the Iraqi freedom fighters than with the Modern Crusaders, the foreign military invaders of Iraq.

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(Editors' Note: This article was written before the release of Filipino worker Angelo de la Cruz by his Iraqi captors in July 2004 following President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's decision to withdraw the Filipino military contingent from Iraq.)

The chaos surrounding current events in Iraq is difficult to characterize in the sense that one does not know what's going on from day to day. Many observers have referred to it not only as a quagmire representing a dire predicament, but also a quicksand capable of sucking people into a deep mass of loose sand mixed with water, which could result in death. This metaphor is not entirely out of place. It is the reality of the war in Iraq. For this reason, among others, the Philippines should not get deeper into the quagmire and quicksand that is Iraq today.

Since the war on terrorism was launched by President George W. Bush following the downfall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Philippines, being a staunch ally of the US, has been gradually drawn into this theater of death and destruction on the other side of the globe. At this writing more than 800 US troops have perished amid escalating violence in Iraq, not to mention many more from Italy, Spain, Japan and other countries constituting the so-called "coalition of the willing" supporting Bush's crusade in Iraq. It is interesting to note that former supporters of the US war effort like Spain and Poland later pulled out their troops from Iraq, but more about this later.

A report in April 2004 by Michael Barker of *Voice of America* (Barker 2004) indicates that there are about 1,000 documented Filipino civilians living in Iraq, as well as 50 soldiers and policemen deployed on a US-led humanitarian mission. The report also indicates that 500 Filipino workers were at one point stranded at a US airbase in Iraq and had not been able to leave the country. Of the original 97 humanitarian workers, only 51 remain in Iraq after 46 returned to the Philippines.

In another report by Carlos Conde published in *New York Times*, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo suggested that she might withdraw the small Filipino military detachment if the violence escalated. "While the Philippine government is determined to help the Iraqi people in rebuilding their nation," she said, "the safety of our peacekeeping forces in Iraq is still our utmost concern" (Conde 2004). Meanwhile, a Filipino driver who had been abducted with eight other foreigners traveling to Fallujah, a battle zone, was freed. However, other reports indicated that a Filipino driver was killed in a roadside ambush.

Anti-war demonstrations have been regularly conducted throughout the country deploring Macapagal-Arroyo's continuing support of President Bush's unrelenting war against Iraq. Renato Reyes, an anti-war organizer, retorted, "For a country like the Philippines with its own set of domestic problems, maintaining Filipino troops in Iraq could hardly be seen as beneficial to our country" (Quoted in Conde 2004).

He is correct and the president, who now appears to have won the May 2004 elections, would be well advised to stop or suspend the deployment of Filipino troops to Iraq, not even as humanitarian workers under the auspices of the UN. To say this is not to be isolationist or inhumanitarian. It is simply to underscore the basic reality in this continuing war, which is the safety and security of those who get involved in it. The fact that Iraqi sovereignty is to be established on June 30 does not guarantee the cessation of violence. In fact it might even get worse.

However, a recent report announced that the Philippine government is considering deploying 29 additional troops to Iraq after the handover of sovereignty to the Iraqi Governing Council at the end of June 2004. There are other reports that the Philippine government has pledged to the Iraqi Governing Council additional troops boosting its number of Filipino contingent to 500.

The numbers are not so much at issue here as the reasons for getting embroiled in a war not of our own making. From a practical standpoint, how can involvement in this war indeed benefit us, who have enough quagmires and quicksands of our own to contend with? There are those who would argue that the millions of US dollars we get in return would be used to alleviate our fundamental problems like poverty, corruption and lawlessness. But this argument has been used repeatedly and rendered bankrupt in our contemporary history. And always the situation gets worse as far as solving basic Filipino

problems is concerned. There is something terribly wrong with the direction that our national leadership has taken us in our recent history, which has been marked with an intense, if mindless, adherence to the US line.

Iraq aside, from a moral standpoint, where does one draw the line in the exercise of military power by the US, which has only five percent of the population, but whose economy represents approximately one-third of the entire world's GDP? Political analyst and presidential adviser in the Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton administrations David Gergen, writing back in the fall of 2003, notes that Bush has "embraced a command-and-control style that sharply challenges much of today's conventional wisdom about leadership, and indeed is a marked departure from other presidents" (Gergen 2003, 15). Gergen speculates that presidential strategist Karl Rove, "ever resourceful, is plotting ways for Bush to become another William McKinley, breaking a long stalemate in American politics by lifting Republicans into long-term dominance of Congress as well as the White House"(Gergen 2003, 15).

Gergen further notes that while President Bush sometimes reaches out for alternative views, he and his administration have acquired over time "a reputation for being one of the most closed and ideological in recent years" (Gergen 2003, 17*).* And even if his top-down assertive leadership has strengthened Bush's political base, it carries with it "deep and dangerous risks" which could eventually be fatal for his presidency, Gergen concludes.

The last elections in Spain sent a strong message to the Aznar government, which supported the US war initiative, by ousting it in favor of an anti-war candidate. The vicious bombing of a train in Madrid, in which hundreds were killed and seriously wounded, further underscored the perils of undue involvement in a war unilaterally unleashed by the greatest power on earth. Poland was quick to sense a backlash and hastened to withdraw its troops as well. The Koizumi government in Japan has been the object of large popular protests for its willingness to send troops to Iraq.

It would do well for the incoming Philippine administration to ponder these questions. Hopefully, some rational voices will resonate with the rest of the Filipino populace and caution self-restraint. "Should we wait for a Filipino soldier or social worker to die before we decide to send them back to the country?" asked Senator Manuel Villar in a statement.

The Arroyo administration has committed itself to focus on policies that attack the roots of terrorism, such as poverty and corruption. This is her main challenge and she should not be distracted from this. She has six more years to make it stick. She would be well advised to try to distance herself from the moral absolutism and unilateral exercise of power by an obsessed American presidency. She has to develop the hallmark of her own presidency, her legacy, which is not to be in the shadow of the current "King of the World." It is her call.

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In early 2003, when I wrote a commentary on the Philippine position on Iraq, I argued then, as I argue now, that the Philippines should not support the US war.

Our government's support for the war was then premised on the need to contribute to the effort against international terrorism of the 9/11 kind. Washington to date has been unable to convince even some of its closest allies that there is a significant link between Saddam Hussein's government and Al Qaeda. Moreover, while Saddam has fallen, Bin Laden continues to elude arrest. And by becoming embroiled in an insurgency in Iraq, the US itself has become distracted from larger anti-terror efforts. Clearly, the situation in Iraq has to be assessed on

its own terms, independent of Philippine commitment to the anti-terror campaign.

The toppling of a sovereign government, occupation of its territory, and now the human rights abuses against imprisoned Iraqi citizens, will not make disaffection or violence among Muslims go away in southern Philippines, or for that matter in Aceh, Pattani, or Palestine. On the contrary, the actions of the United States and its allies may have further deepened the perception by some Muslims that the United States is anti-Islam. I believed it has helped fan a sense of religious persecution, aggravating tensions not just among states but worse, in communities where Muslims and non-Muslims must learn to coexist in mutual tolerance if they are to survive on a day-to-day basis.

To complicate things for the Philippines, among our immediate neighbors are Indonesia and Malaysia, countries with majority Muslim populations, where pressures from broad-based conservative Islamic organizations upon their predominantly secular and moderate national leadership is growing. Filipinos cannot remain insensitive nor unsympathetic to what is going on across our borders, for this is bound to have spillover effects on us, especially in Muslim Mindanao.

Then, too, the US flouted international law and undermined the UN processes when it unilaterally decided to wage war, insisting that it possessed evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and that this made "regime change" necessary. Today, US officials have practically admitted that the war was based on lies and exaggerations perpetrated by partisan elements like Chalabi and too willingly embraced by officials in the CIA and Pentagon who liked what he had to say.

The groundswell of opposition against the US war in Iraq stemmed at least partly from the way Washington chose to ignore the counsel of other members of the international community. Even Henry Kissinger wrote of the dangers of unilateralism: "the dominant trend in American foreign-policy thinking must be to transform power into consensus so that the international order is based on agreement rather than reluctant acquiescence." In the case of Iraq, it was not just reluctant acquiescence but active resistance by allies such as France and Germany, and by peoples across the globe. Yet now, desperate for an exit strategy, the US turns to these same players and expects the UN to help clean up its mess in Iraq!

The George W. Bush administration has done a great disservice to the international community and to the American people. There was little to be done while Washington tested new doctrines of

"pre-emption" and "regime change" on Iraq. But can anyone now legitimately oppose any other big country invoking the same against a weaker country that it perceives to be a threat? Will the US itself have any moral ground to do so, in the future? Will principles of international law, including respect for sovereignty and the Geneva Convention regarding treatment of prisoners, survive such a challenge and continue to have meaning after Iraq?

The reasons the Philippines should not support the war are the same reasons the US should not have waged it in the first place. At the end of the day, our government chose to loyally support an ally through thick and thin, even when it made unprincipled decisions, of course with the hope of some reward. But from the point of view of the national interest, or out of respect for accepted norms in inter-state relations, or simply out of sympathy for a once more unjustly dominated people (as we were, not just once but time and again), the Philippines should withdraw its participation in the illegal occupation of Iraq and henceforth support only solutions fully backed by the required processes in the United Nations, and drawn up in consultation with a broad section of the Iraqi people.

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The US-led attack on Iraq marked a new era in global affairs. The Philippines support for the US action is based on the principle of fighting terrorism, so the government claims. But whatever the real reasons for supporting the US in this endeavor, whether a principled fight against terror or for some other pragmatic considerations like US military assistance, one thing remains evident—that the Philippines must now face the consequences of traditional principles of state sovereignty and non-interference being redefined as a neo-imperialist era takes shape.

Each state has "supreme legal authority over its own affairs and is fully equal to every other state", according to the Hugo Grotious, considered as the father of international law. This principle, also known as sovereignty, has underpinned the state system since 1648

through what is classically known as the Treaty of Westphalia. Leaders of the warring states in Western Europe realized that the only way to keep the peace was to recognize each other's sovereign rights within their own territory and to refrain from meddling in the affairs of their neighbors.

Sovereignty used to mean the "recognition by all states of the independent territorial integrity and inviolability of each state as represented by its government"; thus non-interference in the internal affairs of another state is held as something sacred.

But the year 2003 marks the beginning of rethinking of these principles of sovereignty and non-interference. The US-led attacks on Iraq would now indicate that a sovereign state could enter the territory of another sovereign state without the latter's expressed consent and replace an existing government with a type of regime the attacking state chooses. People may prefer a democratic regime; myself included. But it may not be their prerogative to impose such a preference on other people if the latter prefer otherwise.

While the United Nations itself recognizes that other states may "intervene" in the affairs of another state for humanitarian reasons such as actions to prevent a government from killing the very people it is supposed to protect, the UN does not condone acts of "interference." In the language of the UN and international law, "intervention" may be allowed but "interference" is not, a distinction that must be made and understood.

Furthermore, the US-led operation against the Iraqi regime has re-emphasized the concept of a hegemon, a state that has preponderant economic and military power. The US, being the sole superpower in the world after the disintegration of the Soviet Union as the Cold War ended, has always been recognized as a hegemon. Yet, it was not really expected that it would exercise its hegemonic powers to do what it did in Iraq. At least not until it invaded Baghdad, using not only its economic powers but its military might as well.

And indeed, the role of the military powers of a state in this particular regard could not be ignored. The operation as seen globally through cable television highlights the utility of high technology in today's war. States that have access to high-tech equipment and gadgets definitely have an advantage. The Gulf War in the early 1990s has shown how advanced technology underpinned the allied forces' victory. In 2003, the world witnessed more advanced weapon systems as the US and its allies fought the Iraqi forces.

While the status of the United States as a hegemon has risen to new heights, the attack against Iraq may have undermined the status of the United Nations as an instrument for promoting global peace and security. Some have always doubted the utility of international and regional institutions such as the UN in promoting peace pointing out that these bodies are but useless decorations in the international system. While there are others who see the usefulness of international institutions in keeping the world secure and peaceful, the war in Iraq may have proven true the arguments of those skeptical of the UN.

A new period in international affairs has therefore dawned. Could this period be aptly called neo-imperialism to distinguish it from the previous era of imperialism? Empires overran territories and established imperial governments in the areas they conquered. What the world is witnessing at this point is a state entering another territory to establish a new government, one that is now ran by the Iraqis themselves but a regime preferred by the United States. The form of imperialism may be different but the principles behind are the same. And the Philippines, by choosing to support the US in its actions against Iraq, has de-facto chosen to be part of the neo-imperial power and a neo-imperial world order. The question that now begs to be answered is: would the Philippines be able to meet the challenges brought by such a world order to its own status as a sovereign state?

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