

Perspective

The US and the Bangsamoro Struggle: Selfish-Determination vs Self-Determination

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That external powers and local elites seek to hijack liberation struggles for their own vested interests is reason to strengthen - rather than to withhold - support for the Moros' struggle for self-determination.

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What is most striking about the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) report on its role "facilitating" the peace process in the Philippines is how openly it boasts of its unique capacity to be "an instrument for advancing US interests." [\[1\]](#)

The USIP is special, according to the report, because while it can claim to be separate from the US government, it plays a role in the US' government's internal division of labor that no other US agency can. The report makes it clear that it was tasked to do the job by the US State Department and that it worked closely with the US embassy and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Manila. But its "quasi-governmental, track one-and-a-half" status, USIP claims, supposedly enabled it to earn the confidence of local actors so much so that even members of the government peace panel reported inside information about cabinet discussions to them. [\[2\]](#) The USIP, "offered a new policy instrument of the US government" which could be "incorporated more frequently into the toolkit of US foreign policy," notes the report. [\[3\]](#)

The USIP report has become hot copy lately, with the US' role being cited as one more ground for questioning, if not opposing, the controversial Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The latest result of protracted negotiations that date as far back as 1976, the MOA-AD has been billed as a breakthrough towards ending nearly four decades of war between the central Philippine government and Moros advocating for greater self-rule. [\[4\]](#) Moving towards the establishment of a sub-state within the Philippines, [\[5\]](#) the agreement has deeply polarized the country and has since been junked by the Philippine government. Another - perhaps more dangerous - round of fighting has erupted.

What interests?

The US began to be more involved in the war between the Philippines and the MILF beginning in 2003, with the USIP “facilitating” negotiations through meetings with negotiating panels, providing technical expertise, conducting forums, publishing reports, and other activities. Not unrelated to the USIP’s work, as the USIP makes clear however, has been the expansion of the US military role in the country, as well as the escalation in US “development” and “humanitarian assistance.” [6]

Two possibilities have recently been proposed to explain the US agenda: one is that the US is supporting the creation of an independent pro-US Bangsamoro state as a hedge against a more pro-China Philippines; [7], the other is that US is deliberately fomenting and prolonging conflict between Filipinos and Moros so as to justify its intervention in Mindanao.

[8] the other is that US is deliberately fomenting and prolonging conflict between Filipinos and Moros so as to justify its intervention in Mindanao.]] Both assume common underlying geostrategic objectives: access to natural resources, including potential oil reserves, as well as military presence or basing.

In assessing these possibilities, it is useful, first of all, to bear in mind the US’ actual record: it has crushed or has sought to crush pro-independence movements in places it has invaded and occupied (Examples: what became the Philippines – including the “Moro” states that were incorporated into it – in the early 20th century, Iraq and Afghanistan today); it has no problems supporting – or not actively opposing – separatist/ pro-independence movements against regimes it doesn’t like (Examples: Kosovo against Serbia, the Kurds against Saddam’s Iraq, Tibet against China, Taiwan over China, etc); but it has also stood by central governments against separatist movements if these governments’ stability and support are seen as more important for attaining US goals (Examples: Georgia over South Ossetia, Thailand over the Patani Malays of Southern Thailand, Indonesia over the West Papuans, Marcos over the Moros in the 1970s, etc).

That last example is particularly instructive: from 1972-1976, when the poorly armed and poorly trained Moro fighters took on the might of Marcos’ military, the US provided Marcos over \$500-million in military assistance which contributed to tipping the balance against the Moros fighters. [9] Despite this, the Moros – despite being poorly armed and poorly trained – managed to bring the war to a stalemate and forced the strongman to the negotiating table. The question is, has the situation changed so much that the US has switched sides in order to achieve its geopolitical objectives, as some believe?

Whose side?

What happened as late as last week was telling: when a US military-contracted helicopter went to evacuate injured fighters in an encounter in Basilan, they came to the succor of Filipino soldiers – not Moro rebels. [10] This week, in the latest proof that US troops are not only “training” Filipino soldiers, American soldiers were spotted helping Filipino troops recover unexploded bombs right during a lull in hostilities in North Cotabato. [11]

In short, the US military is shoulder-to-shoulder with Filipino soldiers, not Moro fighters. From 2002-2006 alone, the United States has given around \$250 million not to the MILF but to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (See graph below). This has been equivalent to nearly 10% of the Philippines’ annual military budget. [12] On top of this, the \$260-million worth of “development” aid that the US has poured into Mindanao in the last 6 years [13] have been intended to legitimize the national government in the eyes of Muslims – and, hence, to douse support for Moro self-

determination movements.

Who have been the targets of the 300-500 US Special Forces that have stayed on indefinitely in Mindanao since 2002 to help Filipino troops in their day-to-day operations? These would have to be the alleged members of the Abu Sayyaf, the more politicized factions of which continue to espouse the original goal of the MILF — Bangsamoro independence. On several occasions, even members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the other Moro movement which has a peace agreement with the government, have been targeted in operations assisted by the US. have been intended to legitimize the national government in the eyes of Muslims – and, hence, to douse support for Moro self-determination movements.

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Does the US's openness to – if not actual encouragement of– the MOA signal a change?

Dumping an ally?

While US support for a pro-US Bangsamoro state is not inconceivable, the US can be expected to take this route only after concluding that a) the Philippine state can no longer be counted on to give it what it wants and that it can only get what it wants from a pro-US Bangsamoro state b) that there is a good degree of assurance that this Bangsamoro state will indeed turn out to be pro-US c) the potential benefits of abandoning an old ally in favor of a newly created one outweigh the potential costs.

First, is it the case that the Philippine government has become so hopelessly unreliable in promoting US interests and should therefore be abandoned? As we have documented in our report, *At the Door of All the East: The Philippines in US Military Strategy*, the US has managed to establish a more expansive, more deeply entrenched, more flexible, and less politically obtrusive military presence in the Philippines since 2001. [16] The US would not have been able to do this if not for President Arroyo who has gone out of her way – farther than her predecessors – in accommodating US demands. [17]

It is true that Arroyo has lately expanded relations with China but, with the economic opportunities China offers, so have many other pro-US allies. The Philippines may have welcomed US\$6.6 million in military assistance from China last year [18] – peanuts compared to what it gets from the US – but it is still unlikely to grant China what it gives the US – military presence in its territory – nor is it likely to give China what it presumably favors if it could ask for anything – the removal of US troops from the country. In any case, if the Philippines were really in danger of being lost to China, wouldn't the more rational response on the part of the US be to avoid that from happening by trying to outcompete the Chinese? Wouldn't the easiest way for the Philippines to fall into China's embrace be for the US to dump it?

Finding new friends?

Second, is there a fair degree of assurance that the leaders of a new Bangsamoro state will necessarily be pro-US – so much more so as to compensate for the loss of a formerly pro-US Philippines?

Soliciting the support of external powers to boost one's standing in internal politics is certainly not exclusive to Filipinos. Contrary to the myth that the Moros were all united in resisting American colonizers in the early 20th century, many datus and sultans actually collaborated with the United States, to fend off Christianized Filipinos' attempts to dominate them, as well as to preserve their privileged status within Moro society. Many ordinary Moros fought valiantly against the colonizers only to be sold out and betrayed by some of their leaders. The landlords that dominated the Philippine state would not have succeeded in resettling thousands of mostly landless northern peasants to Mindanao, thereby dispossessing and displacing Moros and other indigenous people so they could defuse rural unrest and hold on to their lands, were it not for the legitimization for these actions provided by the participation of Moro elites in the national system of patronage and spoils.

Today, there is no shortage of Moros ready to outbid Filipinos in offering Bangsamoro territory and cooperation in support of US foreign policy goals. Indeed, the USIP, along with other US government agencies, has been busy identifying, grooming and financing Moro leaders – showering them with scholarship opportunities, bringing them to the US, employing them, funding their NGOs, etc. [19] As in other sites of US' political intervention, the USIP's and other agencies' work in "strengthening Intra-Moro communication and unity" [20] is a deliberate political project to locate, build relations with and build the capacity of those moderate pro-US Moros in an attempt to make them better-resourced and more influential than the alternatives. [21]

Similar to Moro leaders in the past who preferred being part of a separate colony or protectorate of the United States to being part of the Philippines, some Moro leaders today can justify supporting the US – or at least, not antagonizing it – as a pragmatic policy for advancing Moro nationalist goals. It is indicative, for example, that neither the MNLF nor the MILF leaderships have come out after all these years to categorically oppose the expanding US military presence in Mindanao. [22] After faintly making noise about the US military activities in Mindanao last February, for example, the MILF turned quiet after a visit from US Ambassador Kristie Kenney. [23] A number of influential Moros, many of them among those who have benefited from US patronage, have unsurprisingly come out in support of US military intervention in Mindanao.

The calculus facing the leaders of those who have won their independence, however, could be different from that facing those who have yet to gain it. Assuming that the Moros succeed in getting their own state with US support, the Moros would also become less dependent on external patrons for a struggle that has been won. Once this happens, prolonging the alliance with the US could conceivably become harder to sell to the Moro people, sensitized as they are to the plight of fellow Muslims from Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan under US aggression. Moro elites would still want foreign patrons to preserve their power like other elites; but they would also have to be concerned with winning elections or retaining legitimacy. The more likely outcome is a Bangsamoro that is just like many other Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia or Malaysia, where support for US foreign policy, while not impossible, has become a political liability that few politicians willing to bear. [24] Hence, betting on a pro-US Bangsamoro state may be a risky gamble that the US may not want to take.

A risky gamble

It could take the risk – but only if the probable benefits outweigh the costs. This brings us to our third question: Is the US likely to gain more from the creation of a new state whose allegiances are uncertain than from losing an old reliable ally?

Consider the US' need for basing. While US military presence has expanded in recent years to include areas in Mindanao, a quick look at the map below shows that it covers the entire country. In Mindanao, this presence extends to areas that are not to be covered under the proposed Bangsamoro sub-state. The US Special Forces' Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines' (JSOTF-P) headquarters, for instance, is in Zamboanga City, whose mayor Celso Lobregat has been at the forefront of opposition to the MOA-AD and who has made no secret of his "wish" for the US to build a permanent base in his city. [25]

That the JSOTF-P is in Mindanao is not necessarily in preparation for the rise of a new Moro state: it is where it is because it is where its presence can be more plausibly explained – Mindanao is where the "terrorists" are – rather than, say, in Batanes, which is closer to Taiwan and mainland China, but where it has no pretext to be stationed in. The JSOTF-P is assured of remaining – and could even choose to expand – in Zamboanga City with or without the consent of the Moros as long as the Philippine government agrees. Why, in abandoning the Philippines for a pro-US Bangsamoro state, would the US want to give up its control of or access to all those ports and facilities in Subic, Nueva Ecija, Batanes, Cebu, General Santos City, etc just to have bases in Mindanao when it can have them all?

Could the US just be hedging its bets [26] – not necessarily abandoning the Philippines now but just making sure it has a contingency plan in case the Philippines crosses the line? Or could it just be pitting off the Filipinos and the Moros to make them outbid each other for US support, thereby giving the US the power to hold both on a leash while giving it the pretext to get what it wants (basing, market for equipment, allies)?

This is plausible. But it is also riskier than sticking to the status quo because it could turn into reality precisely that scenario that the US may want to avoid: that Filipino elites, not sure of US loyalty, could increasingly be alienated by the US and consequently be lured by China to its side; at the same time, that Moro fighters, realizing that it is bullets provided by the US to Filipino soldiers that are killing them, could turn against the US. Filipinos and Moro elites may often find it rewarding to sidle up to the US, but they are also not unthinking puppets with no regard for their own interests.

The larger interests

It is always tricky figuring out how exactly US strategy is conceived: there is always a danger of imputing too much – but also of too little – rationality into US thinking. Another explanation for the US' interest in the peace talks and its openness to the solution posed by the MOA could be this: the US still wants and needs the Philippines as its ally but in order for it to be of any use for advancing US interests, the Philippines has to be stronger and more stable. And it won't be so for as long as it remains bogged down fighting various separatist and communist movements simultaneously.

More pragmatic and more far-sighted – and hence as self-interested but more cunning – than some Filipino leaders concerned more with keeping their offices or landholdings than with promoting the enduring collective interests of ruling groups, the US probably understands that it is only by addressing what the USIP dares to correctly describe as the Moro's "legitimate grievances" that the

Philippines can disarm the MILF, move on to other enemies, and become the stable reliable ally that the US wants and needs it to be. In so doing, the US is also able to reward, co-opt and strengthen that section of the Moro elites who could otherwise be antagonistic to its objectives or who could lose out to those with more radical social and economic programs should war persist.

To keep all three – Moro, Filipino, and US elites – together, however, the acceptable solution for the US will have to be one which would still promote their larger common interests. It is for these reasons that the MOA's provisions on natural resources are worth scrutinizing: the US may be indifferent to how the Filipinos and Moro ruling groups split revenues with each other – just as long as, say, UNOCAL, which is already operating in the Sulu sea, and other corporate interests are not shut out from the region. As if to appease all those investors who are already harnessing Mindanao's resources, the MOA spells out that all mining concessions, timber licenses shall continue to remain in place unless revoked by the BJE. [27] What could be in store is just a US-presided renegotiation in the power relations between Moro and Filipino ruling groups.

A continuing struggle

A more stable Philippines, with a Mindanao that is “peaceful” and open for business, with pliant, relatively more powerful and less subordinated Moro elites at its helm, seems to be a more ideal scenario for the US than an antagonized pro-China Philippines and/or an independent Bangsamoro state with leaders who have uncertain loyalties. But while this scenario is rosier for the US, and arguably even for Filipino elites, it may not necessarily lead to liberation.

To the extent that the MOA promises more power to the Moro people as a whole, much more than any agreement achieved in over thirty years of fighting and negotiations, it can potentially be a step away from the Moros' long history of marginalization as a people, so long as it does not end up trampling on the rights of other oppressed peoples. How that power will be used and for whose benefit, however, will only be decided in a continuing contest: whether it is a step towards emancipation depends on who will eventually prevail.

As is to be expected, in this struggle, other self-interested parties are attempting to hijack the Moros' right to self-determination to their advantage. To oppose measures that would advance the Moros' struggle – in the hope of frustrating these parties – may backfire: it could only end up pushing the Moros into these parties' embrace, allowing them to pass themselves off as their protectors. That others seek to instrumentalize the Moros' struggle is no reason to turn our backs on all those who, along with the landless Christian migrants or the indigenous peoples, have been historically oppressed and who have long been advocating for a just end to the war. It is even more reason to stand by their side.

P.S.

* From Focus on the Philippines, August 2008, special issue “Mindanao in Focus”:

<http://www.focusweb.org/philippines/fop/aug2008/>

* A graph and a map are not reproduced here and can be consulted through the above link.

* Herbert Docena (herbert focusweb.org) wrote Focus on the Global South's special report on the US military presence in the Philippines, ‘At the Door of All the East’: The Philippines in US Military Strategy.

Footnotes

- [1] G. Eugene Martin and Astrid Tuminez, "Toward Peace in the Southern Philippines: A Summary Assessment of the USIP Philippine Facilitation Project, 2003-2007," *United States Institute of Peace Special Report 202*, February 2008, p. 2,14.
- [2] Notes the report: "The PFP [Philippine Facilitation Project] staff met often with members of the GRP [Government of the Republic of the Philippines] negotiating team and occasionally received reports that their recommendations on policy, negotiating strategies, and tactics were discarded, weakened, or undercut by cabinet members." (p.13)
- [3] "Toward Peace in the Southern Philippines," p.14, 19. For a critical profile of the USIP, see Interhemispheric Resource Center, "United States Institute of Peace," <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/gw/2....>. For a journalistic profile of the institute, with quotes from USIP staff involved in the Philippines, see Corine Hegland, "Peace Work," *National Journal*, April 26, 2008, <http://nationaljournal.com/njmagazi...>
- [4] For more on the war, see Kristina Gaerlan, and Mara Stankovitch (eds.), *Rebels, Warlords, and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in Southern Philippines* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000); Thomas McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2000); Marites Danguilan Vitug and Glenda M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Manila: Institute for Popular Democracy and Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 2000); Patricio N. Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000)
- [5] The proposed state will be in a "free association" with but will not separate from the Philippines. For more on this, see Soliman M. Santos Jr. "BJE and the question of independent statehood," August 12, 2008.
- [6] For more on this, see 'At the Door of All the East': The Philippines in US Military Strategy (Quezon City: Focus on the Global South, 2008), www.focusweb.org/at-the-door-of-all-the-east.pdf
- [7] William M. Esposito, "What's in it for the US in an independent Moroland?," *Philippine Star*, September 2, 2007; "ARMM polls deferment: The confluence of 3 agendas," *Philippine Star*, July 29, 2008; "The Untold Realities of the MILF Peace Pact," *Philippine Star*, August 5, 2008; "Know how the BJE serves US geo-political interests," *Philippine Star*, August 12, 2008.
- [8] Kilusan para sa Pambasang Demokrasya's rejects the MOA-AD, claiming it was a "handiwork of the US government", which would allow the US to play a "de facto peacekeeping role" between both sides, thereby allowing it to establish US military installations within Bangsamoro territory ("Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE): A US-Crafted Territory," Press statement, August 8, 2008). National Democratic Front of the Philippines chief political consultant Jose Maria Sison reasons along the same lines: He claims the US and the Philippine governments are foisting the MOA on the Moros "as a device of pretended generosity in order to seize the initiative" to prolong the peace talks and to justify deploying US and Filipino troops to Mindanao for oil, bases, and other resources (Jose Maria Sison, "Pretense at Generosity with Full Malice by US Imperialism and the Arroyo Regime," Press statement, August 15, 2008; see also TJ Burgonio, "MILF sought US intervention in peace talks with RP gov't," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 15, 2008)

[9] US Military Assistance to the Philippines, 1972-1976 (US Agency for International Development [USAID], "US Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations," <http://qesdb.usaid.gov/gbk/index.html>)

[10] Nikko Dizon, "TV reporter witnesses 4-hour dying of a Marine," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 13, 2008.

[11] Carolyn Arguillas, "US troops join search for unexploded bombs in conflict area," *MindaNews*, August 18, 2008; For more on US troops' involvement in the war, see *Unconventional Warfare: Are US Troops engaged in an 'Offensive' War in the Philippines?* (Quezon City: Focus on the Global South, 2008) <http://www.focusweb.org/index.php?o...>

[12] US Military Assistance to the Philippines, 1972-1976 (US Agency for International Development [USAID], "US Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations," <http://qesdb.usaid.gov/gbk/index.html>; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Facts on International Relations and Security Trends database," <http://first.sipri.org/>

[13] USAID, "Activities in Mindanao," <http://philippines.usaid.gov/docume...>

[14] Herbert Docena, "On-the-Job Training: Are US soldiers engaged in actual combat in the Philippines?," Focus on the Global South, March 9, 2006

[15] See complete report of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights Region IX office, docketed as CHR-IX-2008-2221 and approved by Atty. Jose Manuel S. Mamauag MNSA; Citizens Peace Watch, Report of the Fact-finding Mission to Zamboanga City and Sulu, February 2008.

[16] 'At the Door of All the East': The Philippines in US Military Strategy (Quezon City: Focus on the Global South, 2008), www.focusweb.org/at-the-door-of-all-the-east.pdf

[17] It is true that Arroyo withdrew from the US-led "coalition of the willing" occupying Iraq but so have many other pro-US allies which the US has not and will conceivably not want to abandon: Japan, Italy, Thailand, etc. In any case, what Arroyo has done to make up for that withdrawal arguably outweighs what she may have deprived the US of: a little over 100 Filipino soldiers in a 160,000-strong occupying army.

[18] Noel Tarrazona, "US, China vie for Philippine military influence," *Asia Times*, September 20, 2007.

[19] In this, a certain Ishak Mastura's recommendation to the US seems to be being heeded. In a blog titled, "Moro Views on Bangsamoro affairs," a post under his name reads: "My best advice for the US, Australia and other interested international actors in Mindanao is to identify the Moros that can be on your side, befriend them, offer them support on their legitimate aspirations... and you can be sure of longer term gains in the Great Game as China looms on the horizon." It is not clear whether it is the same Ishak Mastura, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao Department of Trade and Industry Secretary, who has also urged the United States to establish a "pro-Western Muslim polity" to check China's rise (See Footnote 19). Whether such views have resonance among Moros - especially elites - is also difficult to ascertain but it at least demonstrates that such notions - of soliciting US support in exchange for promoting US foreign policy goals - are being entertained.

[20] "Toward Peace in the Southern Philippines," p. 14.

[21] For more on US efforts to build the capacity of local elites supportive of its strategic objectives, see William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For an analogous project, that of the US in Iraq, which illuminates similar dynamics in Mindanao, see *Silent War: The US' Ideological and Economic Occupation of Iraq* (Bangkok: Focus on the Global South, 2005)

[22] Rank-and-file members however have expressed their opposition to the US presence and have joined campaigns against it, though its not clear whether they have done so with the tacit encouragement of their leaders or in defiance of them.

[23] Jason Gutierrez, "US envoy Kenney, MILF chief Murad meet on peace process," Agence France Press, February 19, 2008.

[24] See pp 91-106 of 'At the Door of All the East'.

[25] Julie Alipala, Jeoffrey Maitem, Jeffrey M. Tupas, "Mayor says US bases wishful thinking," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 29, 2008.

[26] "To hedge their bets" is in fact what, according to Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao Trade Secretary Datu Ishak Mastura, the US should consider doing in the face of China's increasing influence in the Philippines. He wrote: "[T]he present stalemate between the MILF and the Philippine military presents [the US and Japan] the opportunity to hedge their bets with the Bangsamoro. This can be done by establishing a pro-Western Muslim body polity in Southeast Asia through the re-territorialization of a Bangsamoro homeland within the Philippine state." Mastura also advises the US, if it wants its counter-terrorism efforts to succeed, to take the local Muslim population's "state-building and power-sharing agenda seriously." (Datu Ishak Mastura, "Security for Economic Growth: Ethnic conflict and the US in Southern Philippines," <http://intellibriefs.blogspot.com/2...>

[27] "Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001"