



## **U.S.-Philippine Relations after the Iraq Crisis**

by Mely Caballero-Anthony

It's been one month since Filipino truck driver Angelo de la Cruz was released by militants in Iraq after the Philippine government bowed to his captors' demands to withdraw its troops from Iraq. President Gloria Magapagal-Arroyo's decision to bring back the troops less than a month earlier than scheduled had been widely criticized, particularly by the United States and Australia, on two counts. First, the withdrawal meant that the Philippines reneged on its commitment to the U.S.-led coalition in the war in Iraq and in effect, the war on terrorism. Second, by capitulating to the kidnappers' demands, the Philippines, in the words of Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, had "empowered the kidnappers."

One of the possible effects of the Philippines' action is a reassessment of U.S.-Philippines relations that had recently been revitalized after a decade-long hiatus following the closure of U.S. military bases in the country in 1991. U.S. Ambassador to the Philippines Francis Ricciardoni returned to Washington for urgent consultations with the "people in Washington ...[who] will be the ones making decisions, reassessing bilateral relations."

Given the turn of events, among the concerns raised are: (1) whether Washington will review financial aid for the country's development and cut military support for Manila's battle against domestic insurgencies and terrorism, and (2) whether the Philippines' decision to bring back its troops would lead to long-term consequences for the global war against terrorism. While the extent of the damage to bilateral ties has yet to be determined, a few factors need to be mentioned to caution those who would see doom ahead.

### **All Politics are Local**

It bears reiterating here the dictum of former U.S. House of Representative Speaker Tip O'Neill that "all politics are local" to put into context the nature of the bilateral fallout and assess the possible consequence of Manila's "broken" commitment to the Washington-led war in Iraq. Both governments need to look beyond the dismay and consternation of the coalition partners who believe that the Philippines' move only served to embolden the terrorists and President Arroyo's adamant stance that her decision was taken to protect the interest of the nation. They need to have a more nuanced perspective of the stakes. As far as the Arroyo government is concerned, it has to convince Washington that being accountable to its citizens was paramount, before it could convince them that an endeavor – like the war on terrorism – was worth fighting and/or dying for. For the millions of Filipinos who find themselves trapped in poverty-stricken conditions, it is the responsibility of their elected government to address not only the challenges of economic

development to check the outflow of human resources, but also to ensure that their security is not compromised in the name of an "abstract" principle – not caving in to terrorists.

The plight of Angelo de la Cruz touched every Filipino with a family member forced to work overseas because of unemployment at home. According to official figures, there are some 8 million (registered) Filipino contract workers abroad who remit close to \$9 billion that keeps the country's economy afloat, particularly in times of crisis. It was indeed telling of the sorry state of the country's plight that even during the height of the kidnapping crisis in Iraq hundreds of Filipinos were still queuing up outside employment agencies hoping to land a job overseas, especially in the Middle East.

The heightened emotions fanned by de la Cruz's threatened decapitation could have triggered a cataclysmic backlash by this massive force and would have brought down Arroyo's fledgling administration that is still struggling to consolidate its hold on power after a hotly contested election. More important, ignoring the potential risks could have also provided fodder for the communist and Muslim insurgents to once again mount their campaigns to destabilize the government. A quick scan of the Philippine political scene would have also revealed the possible coalition of militant labor unions, nationalist activists, and many other groups that would exploit this weakness to bring down a newly elected government that was perceived to be more concerned with maintaining international credibility than domestic legitimacy.

In short, the hostage crisis happened at the worst time, when the country and its government were most vulnerable. Unlike Japan and Korea, the Philippines is a weak state, enfeebled by the fact that it is captured by many strong interests. In other words, the hostage crisis showed that the Philippines cannot be an effective ally if the government in power is weak and could not muster enough domestic support to remain committed to the U.S.-led coalition. The picture becomes more complex when the imperatives of meeting domestic demands are weighed against the need to uphold a commitment to an international cause – especially when the basis for fighting this cause, like the war in Iraq, is increasingly questioned.

Hence, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's statement that "weakness is provocative" should be heeded – but, for different reasons. It is precisely because a state is weak (not only politically but in security and economic terms) that it needs to be helped, and therefore, the rush to take punitive actions for reneging on a commitment could be counter-productive. Weak states have narrow options; powerful states like the U.S. should moderate expectations of solid commitments from them, given the volatile politics that beset weak states.

## Wither U.S.-Philippine Relations?

To the Philippines, the hostage crisis serves as a reality check for a weak country that has chosen to actively align itself with a superpower without careful consideration of the consequences. Going by the sentiments expressed by many Filipino nationalists, the lessons of the U.S.-Philippine Military Bases Agreement (MBA) of 1947 that allowed for the stationing of U.S. naval and air bases in the Philippines should have been instructive. Despite Martial Law (1972-1986), the Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP) and its political arm, the National Democratic Front (NDF), were able to raise the bases issue to portray the uneven and asymmetrical relationship between the two states. They could claim, at the height of the Cold War, that the military bases were going to be “bases of the country’s insecurity” because the Philippines was going to be caught in great power rivalries and exposed to the possibility of a nuclear conflict between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The presence of U.S. military bases in the country became a useful propaganda tool for the Left to foment discord and instability. There is a close parallel between the national protests then and the protests and discourses heard across the country today with regard to U.S.-Philippine cooperation on counter-terrorism – i.e., that the renewed cooperation served as a “Trojan horse” to allow U.S. military installations back into the country and once again make the country vulnerable.

### Confronting Two Fronts

The onus is clearly on the Arroyo government to convince Washington that the Philippines remains committed to the global fight against terrorism. Thus, in addition to justifying its actions in Iraq as Arroyo did in her State of the Nation Address July 26, 2004, the government should now deal with the problem on two fronts.

First, it has to show visible progress in its own local war against terrorism. That means being on top of the situation vis-

à-vis the dangers posed by local groups who are reported to have links with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah. Arroyo could insist that the fight against terrorism begins at home. But, the Philippine military, the major recipient of U.S. military aid and counter-terrorism training assistance, must be able to demonstrate its capability to fight terrorism and insurgency. Meanwhile, having offered crucial assistance to the Philippines, the U.S. cannot afford to leave the Philippines alone in this battle. Any termination of aid would not serve the bigger interest of fighting terrorism, knowing that the Philippines in particular, and Southeast Asia in general, have become another major front in the battle against this global scourge.

Second, there is the much bigger challenge for the Arroyo government to eliminate the rot and address some of the root causes of its people’s insecurities – i.e., poverty, corruption, and other related issues that insurgents, terrorists groups – or any group for that matter – could use to challenge and destabilize any regime.

More important, the U.S. and the Philippines must realize that their relationship is not based on a single issue but on larger, multifaceted interests. Both states, and perhaps the United States in particular, must assess the depth of this bilateral relationship to determine, rather than confuse, who their real friends and enemies are. A mature relationship could weather a crisis of this nature and allow both countries to move ahead on the basis of a shared commitment to peace and security.

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