

CHAPTER 3

The Continuing Malaise of National Security in the Philippines

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2010 was supposed to be the year when the laying of the foundations of the projected reform of Philippine national defense structures and institutions should have been completed. This was in accordance with the schedule set in the Philippine Defense Reform (PDR) Program which itself was the product of a joint assessment started by the chiefs of the US and Philippine armed forces in 2000 and completed in 2003. The key finding of the Joint Defense Assessment (JDA) was that the Philippines “has not been capable of neutralizing threats to Philippine stability, due, in large part, to systematic failures in policy planning and development, personnel management and leadership, budgeting and resource management, and acquisition” (Yabes 2008). The gestation of what has been a longstanding problem and one the diagnosis for which had been hinted at even before the JDA shows how much strategic programs in the Philippines have been pushed back because of tactical considerations. This is as much an issue of the continuing impact (and prioritization) of the persistent communist insurgency across the country and the armed secessionist movement in the island of Mindanao as it is a question of political will and lack of appreciation for the strategic context of the country’s security. While the Department of National Defense (DND) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have taken steps to address the key reform areas identified in the PDR, little has changed about the policy environment and the domestic security situation that would point to any major shift in the security context of the Philippines.

Meeting the Challenges

The Department of National Defense published in 2010 a booklet entitled “Meeting the Challenges to Philippine Defense and Security” which outlined the DND’s response to the reform areas identified in the PDR (DND 2010). It identifies the main task of the DND and the AFP as four-pronged: (1) to protect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines; (2) to meet all the challenges to national security including terrorism; (3) to contribute to national development; and (4) to promote regional as well as global peace and security. In this context, it defines

national security as a broad concept involving the protection and enhancement of Filipino core values, way of life, institutions, capacity to create and share wealth, sovereignty and territorial integrity, welfare and well-being, and strategic relations. As such, its mission area covers internal security, territorial defense, disaster risk management and response, humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping, international defense and security engagement, and support of national development. As listed, the mission areas seem to indicate a prioritization of the issues with internal security as the primary concern.

Arguably, the most significant threat to the country is still the Communist Party of the Philippines' New People's Army (CPP-NPA) with its 4,111 fighters in 48 guerilla fronts, and influence over 1,017 *barangays* (the smallest administrative unit in the Philippine government) across the country (*ABS-CBN* 2010). These numbers, however, are all down from a year ago. According to the AFP, casualties, surrenderees, and captured fighters have greatly reduced the forces available to the NPA. This is contested by the CPP which claims that it has 110 to 120 guerrilla fronts covering significant portions of 800 municipalities (not just *barangays*) in 70 provinces. The NPA has been aggressive in initiating engagements with AFP forces under conditions that were deemed advantageous to themselves. They have scored some successes in ambushes which have cost the military quite a few casualties. They have also attacked the property of private corporations that have refused to pay "revolutionary tax." Its true strength, however, lies with its political arm. This is composed of civil society groups and political parties aligned with the CPP-NPA that have been participating in mainstream politics since the end of Martial Law in 1986. It is these groups which have managed to keep the movement relevant despite the weakening of its military forces. Regardless of its claims, however, the CPP-NPA of today is a mere shadow of its glory days when it could mobilize battalions of fighters and seemed ready to take on the AFP in small-scale conventional combat. A significant development is its declared readiness to resume peace talks with the government. The initial meetings were held in Oslo in February 2011.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) remains the most potent military threat with no significant change in the number of fighters it commands. It is estimated to have 10,000-12,000 regulars concentrated in Western and Central Mindanao (Lum 2009). The MILF is at the forefront of the movement to establish a Bangsamoro

homeland and has been engaged in armed conflict with the government of the Philippines for over thirty years. Unlike the CPP-NPA, however, the MILF has been in continuing talks with the government since the late 1990s. Talks had bogged down in 2008 when the Supreme Court of the Philippines declared as unconstitutional the framing of the territory of a projected autonomous Bangsamoro homeland within the Philippine state in the context of recognizing their claims to ancestral domain over Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan. This breakdown had led to an intensification of the armed conflict as MILF field commanders acting without orders from the MILF high command launched attacks against predominantly Christian towns and municipalities. A ceasefire has been in place since then although encounters between the AFP and MILF forces have gone on intermittently. In 2010, however, the AFP claimed that it was able to successfully contain the MILF even as the standing ceasefire agreement was largely upheld by both sides. Violent incidents involving the MILF in 2010 were judged to number just 31 compared to 298 in 2009 (*ABS-CBN* 2010). Even as there is a commitment on both sides to resume peace talks (and cautious optimism on its prospects), the start of negotiations was initially left in abeyance as the question of the Third-Party Facilitator of the talks awaited resolution. The Aquino Administration had indicated a preference for having Indonesia as the Third-Party Facilitator while the MILF had said that it wanted Malaysia to remain in that position. The fact, however, that Malaysia had originally been asked by the Philippine government (under the Arroyo Administration) to remain as Third-Party Facilitator in the resumption of talks made the issue largely moot, and just placed the Philippine government in an awkward position.

The third armed group which in early 2000 had supplanted both the CPP-NPA and the MILF as the principal threat to the security of the Philippines is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). In the aftermath of the terror attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, the ASG together with the *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) based principally in Indonesia but with cells operating in Malaysia and Singapore were the principal reason as to why Southeast Asia became the third front of the United States' global war against terror after Afghanistan and Iraq. The ASG became in mid-2000 largely a criminal organization engaged in kidnap for ransom activities. Its links with the JI, however, and the continued attacks targeting Christian targets became the basis for its claim to revolutionary ideals. Continuous pursuit and attacks by the AFP (with the assistance of American special forces, training and equipment) have limited the

geographical scope of their operations to the Zamboanga and Sulu areas, and steadily reduced their numbers. According to the AFP, the group's strength is down from its reported strength of 391 in 2009 to 340 at the end of 2010 (*ABS-CBN* 2010). The frequency of bombing and grenade attacks attributed to them has also gone down to 29 from 54 incidents in 2009. They continue, however, to cause concern out of proportion to their numbers and reach. The church bombing inside a police base in Jolo which caused 11 wounded casualties on Christmas Day has been attributed to the ASG (*The Mindanao Examiner* 2010).

There is an increasing awareness, however, that even as these long-standing threats continue to preoccupy the country's security policy-makers, other sources of vulnerability have increasingly caught the attention of the Philippine government and gained significance as security concerns over the past two decades. In 2009, typhoons *Ketsana* and *Parma* had shown the inadequacy of the infrastructure and state of preparedness of the country in handling multiple and/or successive national emergencies, especially naturally occurring ones. On the latter, this speaks poorly of strategic planning and policy implementation in a country that is frequented by typhoons and low pressure areas at least twenty times a year. This situation has gained increased significance as the last decade has seen an intensification of extreme weather and climate conditions experienced by the country even outside of the usual typhoon season. In 2010, typhoons and low pressure areas brought great volumes of rainfall causing floods in various parts of the country in November and December – which are well outside the typhoon season. The Philippine government has taken measures to increase the country's capacity to prepare against further extreme weather events and in its ability to conduct disaster relief and management operations.

Such measures, however, are increasingly located within a broader context of security. In October, President Benigno Aquino III issued Memorandum Order No. 6 which gave instructions to National Security Advisor Cesar Garcia to oversee the drafting of a national security policy and national security strategy for the country. The process was supposed to be guided by four elements identified as the central concerns of the Aquino Administration: governance, delivery of services, economic reconstruction and sustainable development, and security sector reform (Boradora 2010). These four elements, however, do not really indicate any major shift in

security policy focus as it continues to affirm that internal security remains the core of what Philippine decision makers consider to be the country's source of vulnerability.

Outside of these internal security concerns, the greatest source of vulnerability of the country lies in the widespread diaspora of Filipino workers across the world. An ADB study estimated that ten percent of the country's population is residing outside the Philippines (Maguddayao 2010). At one level, this phenomenon of the overseas Filipino worker has provided the government with a safety valve that has somehow kept social unrest in a poverty-stricken country to a manageable level. Ernesto Pernia of the UP School of Economics had noted that remittances from overseas Filipino workers, which amounted to up to 17.1 percent of GDP in 2010 (Amojelar 2011)¹, had reduced the poverty rate of the Philippines by three to four percentage points or the equivalent of two to three million persons (*Goldstar Daily* 2011). Hence, a crisis or disaster anywhere in the world involving Filipino workers creates potentially severe strains for the Philippine government. In some cases, these strains have even led to a reversal of policy because of the strong public sentiment involving these workers.² In this context, the turmoil in the Arab world created by the Jasmine Revolution of 2011 has potentially disastrous consequences for the Philippines. Romulo Virola, the Secretary General of the National Statistical Coordination Board, pointed to not only the prospective loss of remittances but also "a spike in unemployment due to the addition of 1.3 million OFWs to the labor force" (Amojelar 2011).

Even the issue of overseas Filipino workers, however, together with natural calamities and the insurgencies faced by the Philippine government constitute what are essentially day-to-day concerns that have been approached by Philippine policy makers in a very tactical and reactive fashion. Very little strategic calculation is actually made in thinking about the resolution of these concerns. Their very nature,

¹ An ADB study noted that remittances accounted for 12% of the country's GDP in 2008 making it the "single most important source of foreign exchange to the economy and a significant source of income for recipient families" (cited in Maguddayao 2010).

² The withdrawal of the small Philippine contingent in Iraq in 2004 was largely in response to the public pressure brought upon the Arroyo Administration in response to the threatened murder of Angelo Dela Cruz, a Filipino overseas worker kidnapped by Iraqi extremist insurgents near the city of Fallujah.

however, requires the attention of the government on a regular basis. Consequently, the Philippine government is largely involved in fire-fighting on these everyday fronts, and the principally strategic considerations of territorial defense remain largely a prospective rather than an actual part of the country's security calculations. In that context, the situation regarding the disputed Philippine claim over the Kalayaan Group of Islands (KGI), a part of the Spratly Islands, has provided a mild spark on the need to re-evaluate the external security environment. On 10 March 2009, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo signed into law a bill which redefined the baselines of Philippine territory. What the law does is to adjust the territorial limits of the main archipelago that would allow the Philippines to define its territorial waters, contiguous zones and exclusive economic zones. It does not extend those baselines up to and including the KGI (Severino, n.d.). The Chinese reaction to this submission was expected, although the seriousness with which it was forwarded was perhaps unforeseen as this was a legal action taken by the Philippines not so much to assert its claim unilaterally but rather to meet the deadline set by the UNCLOS on matters having to do with national territory. The Philippines sought to make its baselines compliant with the provisions of the UNCLOS. The Chinese government protested the law arguing that it violated the spirit of the ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOCS). Vietnam did protest as well but did not pursue the issue as much as the Chinese did. Reports of Filipino fishermen in the area being harassed by an increased number of Chinese patrol vessels followed the signing of the law. Although relations between the Philippines and China were not damaged by the situation, there was understandable uncertainty that emerged from it. This contextualizes the situation regarding perceptions of heightened Chinese assertiveness over its claim of undisputed sovereignty over the Spratlys in 2010.

Upon taking over as Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee, Vietnam sought to put the question of the Spratlys in the ASEAN agenda. That this was directed against China was clear, since the idea was to pursue multilateral dialogue between the claimant countries under the aegis of ASEAN and its associated institutions (ASEAN + 3). China preferred a bilateral process of resolving the territorial issues it was involved in. In the context of the Spratlys, China responded to these actions taken by Vietnam by declaring that the question of the South China Sea was a "core concern" of China – a term formerly used to describe China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan and Tibet. In turn, Vietnam sought closer ties with the United States, and the

American aircraft carrier *George Washington* called on the Vietnamese port of Da Nang (*The Washington Times* 2010). At the ASEAN-US Bilateral meeting, State Secretary Hillary Rodham-Clinton said that the South China Sea was now of “strategic interest” to the United States. China’s run-ins with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands were also noted by the ASEAN states (*The Economist* 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010g). The foreign ministers of China and the member-states of ASEAN met on January 24 and 25 in Kunming, China, to forge a more binding agreement than the DOCS to maintain peace and stability in the disputed Spratly islands. Little came out of it as China remained wary of being bound by an agreement over an area for which it considers itself to have “undisputed” sovereignty. All these developments have contributed to perceptions of a China threat looming more tangibly in the eyes of strategic thinkers in ASEAN, including the Philippines (*GMA News* 2011). The question, however, is that recognizing the feasibility of the threat, what are the options open to the country? In this context, the continuing weakness of the external defense capabilities of the Philippines remains the principal issue.

State of the Armed Forces of the Philippines

Overall, the Philippines Armed Forces can be assessed as possessing only the most modest operational capabilities – which reflects the continuing priority given to internal security. Much of the equipment in their inventory, particularly those that are key to protecting the extensive territory of the Philippines, are old, and routinely suffer from poor serviceability and low availability. Outside of a small number of elite ground force units, training standards across the AFP require upgrading. These issues, however, require strategic reflection and will not likely be addressed over the short-term, especially with the continuing dominance of counter-insurgency in the security calculus of the country’s decision-makers. The budget of the DND (which includes the AFP) for 2010 was PhP97.25B, the greater part of which went to the salaries and benefits of civilian and uniformed personnel. The requested budget for 2011 records an increase of eight percent over the past year’s allocation with similar allocation (*Press Release* 2010a). Even with these, the resources needed by the AFP to modernize its external defense capability are not being made available to it. A summary of the current situation of the AFP is outlined below.

Air Defense. The departure of the United States from the Philippines in 1991 triggered

a rapid decline in the capabilities of the Philippine Air Force (PAF). This was compounded by the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, which resulted in the deferral of a long-planned modernization program. Largely as a result of these developments, the PAF now has a very constrained budget. The force confronts a severe lack of spares and limited systems availability. Aircrews are generally poorly trained and suffer from low morale.

The primary missions of the PAF are counter-insurgency assistance or tactical close air support for the Philippine Army. Increased time is currently being devoted to doctrinal development and to the education of the officer corps. However, notwithstanding these efforts, the type of sustained investment program that would be required to resuscitate the primary capabilities of the PAF appears most unlikely during the coming decade. Acquisitions at this point are limited to receiving hand-me-downs from friendly countries. In 2010, the PAF acquired a refurbished C-130H from the Tunisian Air Force. At the same time, plans to purchase helicopters from Poland were put on hold pending clarifications of the procedures followed in their procurement (*Press Release 2010b*).

Maritime Defense. Even more than the Air Force, the Philippine Navy is in dire need of an infusion of modern ships and equipment. A number of its vessels (among which are its largest surface combatants) are of World War Two-vintage. None of its major surface ships are less than twenty-five years old with most being refurbished discards from South Korea. Consistent with the internal security focus of the AFP, the Navy remains oriented towards patrol operations over the country's coastal and archipelagic waters. In the context of its claims to the KGI, the Philippines simply does not possess the military wherewithal to enforce them. There have been plans to modernize the Philippine Navy for many years, but little progress has been made. This is attributable in part to the poor state of the national economy but it is also a result of the Army being assigned a higher priority, due to its pressing internal security commitments. It also, however, reflects the continuing lack of attention given by policy makers to the strategic environment of the Philippines. Overall, the Philippine Navy has only the most basic capabilities for conducting defense operations even within its own archipelagic waters.

Land Defense. The Philippine Army is designed primarily for counter-insurgency

and internal security operations. It is experienced and trained (especially the Marines, and the Army's Rangers and Special Forces), but it is poorly equipped and remains personnel-intensive. In this regard, it is similar to a number of other countries in Southeast Asia. The Philippine Army is unable to implement plans to modernize and introduce conventional land force capabilities partly because of budgetary constraints, and partly because of the continuing commitments to internal security operations. This situation is unlikely to change over the short-term.

The period since the departure of United States forces from Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base in 1991 has been a trying one for the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The efforts to modernize the force that were initiated in the mid-1990s were brought to a halt by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Continuing violence in the Southern Philippines and the CPP-NPA insurgency have thwarted plans to re-orient the AFP against external threats. The Philippines Armed Forces are in dire need of modernization. The political will to initiate such a process is to a large extent married to the prospect of funding being available when the national economy delivers higher sustained rates of growth, and the Muslim insurgencies in the South are brought under control. While the latter has prospects of being reduced with peace talks between the government and the MILF ready to proceed, the resources that are needed to modernize the AFP await largesse that could only come from sustained economic growth over the long term.

Security Relationships

The shortfall in military capability is as always filled up by diplomacy. The Philippines has been extending and strengthening bilateral military ties with its neighbors and other countries in the region. The Philippines signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 26 October 2010 which is intended to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the DND and Vietnam's Ministry of Defense. The MOA covers visits and educational exchanges between the AFP and the Vietnamese People's Army (*Press Release* 2010c). It also has continuing strong ties with Indonesia and Brunei. The Philippines hosted the Philippines-Indonesia Joint Defense Cooperation Committee Meeting on 14 December 2010 in Makati where discussions were held on initiatives to enhance military-to-military cooperation and maritime security among the ASEAN countries (*Press Release* 2010a). It also

has a very strong relationship with Australia which has borne fruit in terms of intelligence cooperation and equipment upgrades. These have been particularly important in the context of counter-terrorism efforts. There is also a defense cooperation agreement with China. This agreement has been the basis for exchange visits between the armed forces of the two countries.

At present, however, the most important defense relationship of the Philippines continues to be with the United States. The reinvigoration of U.S.-Philippine relations that took place in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks has provided the Philippines with field intelligence and training resources that have been valuable in the AFPs fight against the ASG. At the start of the war against terror, the United States has already pledged to furnish the Philippines with \$US92.3 worth of military equipment. Additional support from the United States, and with US urging possibly from other sources, have helped to upgrade at least some internal security capabilities in coming years. This kind of dependence, however, cannot continue. The security of the Philippines will eventually have to be ensured through its own capabilities in providing and deploying the resources needed to insure that the country has the material (human and otherwise) to respond to different sources of threats.

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