



# IT'S LIKE THEY NEVER LEFT

US military presence in the Philippines today

# Post-bases military agreements

- Notwithstanding the rejection of a new bases treaty, the Philippines remained on the radar of the US government.
- The US sought to regain its military foothold on the Philippines through various agreements that would give them flexibility and lessen issues that are associated with the unpopular bases treaty.

# Post-bases military agreements

- In 1999, the Philippine Senate voted to ratify the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement which serves as a legal framework for the treatment of visiting American troops.
- More importantly, the agreement sets the legal basis for the stationing of US troops in the Philippines.

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Unlike the bases treaty, the VFA has no duration. For all intents and purposes, it is in effect indefinitely.



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- The VFA does not specify or limit the number of troops allowed entry into the Philippines
- The VFA does not specify or limit the areas in the Philippines that the “visiting” troops can access
- The VFA does not specify or limit the activities of the “visiting” troops

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Theoretically, the US forces can deploy or station an unlimited number of troops anywhere in the Philippines for whatever unspecified activity



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- The major flaws of the VFA even became more evident in the Balikatan 02-1 which marked the first time that the US forces would conduct “exercises” in Mindanao, in areas such as Zamboanga, Sulu and Basilan, areas that are considered at the center of the armed conflict.

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Balikatan 02-1 occurred during the hostage taking of two Americans, Gracia and Martin Burnham and Filipina nurse Deborah Yap. This further fueled suspicion that the US will be involved in rescue efforts and direct combat operations.
- It was during this period that Mrs. Arroyo called critics of the Balikatan as Abu Sayyaf –lovers.



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- The protests against Balikatan 02-1 gave rise to the so-called Terms of Reference which would serve as a guide for the “exercises” and assuage fears that the US forces are violating the constitution by engaging in actual combat.



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- The TOR lent justification for the presence of US troops in Mindanao
- “The Exercise is a mutual counter-terrorism advising, assisting and training Exercise relative to Philippine efforts against the ASG (Abu Sayyaf Group), and will be conducted in the island of Basilan.”

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- “US Exercise participants shall not engage in combat operations, without prejudice to their right of self-defense” .
- Exercise is under AFP authority but troops remain under command of their respective countries
- The military objectives and targets are explicit (ASG)

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Combat role prohibition has long been circumvented.
- In 2002, Buyong-buyong Isnijal, a civilian was shot by an American soldier on combat patrol in Basilan. Isnijal was suspected of being an ASG member.

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- US soldiers, being in a war-zone, are always open to attacks, thereby making the risk of combat engagement very likely
- Sgt. Mark W. Jackson – killed in a bomb explosion outside Camp Enrile, Malagutay, Zamboanga in 2002.

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- 2007 Maimbung Massacre in Sulu- survivors gave testimonies to the CHR that they saw US troops with the AFP unit that carried out the military operation



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Intelligence gathering is already part of combat operations. Foreign forces are actually being allowed to conduct intel operations on the Philippines and spy on Filipinos!



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Since Balikatan 02-1, the US Special Forces have maintained a continuous presence in Mindanao through the JSOTF-Philippines under the Special Operation Command-PACOM.
- One batch leaves, another enters...in a kind of revolving door fashion...



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- At any given time, there are a number of US troops in the Philippines whether engaged in military exercises or CMOs. It's a less costly way of stationing troops sans any formal bases agreement.



# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- What about the benefits? The positive things like medical missions, development of communities etc?
- These are all part of the “communications strategy” of the US forces, as admitted by their own documents

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- To educate elected officials, opinion leaders and the public on the importance of military training; build public trust and support of training activities; portray the cost of readiness and potential impact of not being ready...and highlight the military as good stewards of the environment.

ANNEX A, *Strategic Communication*  
to USPACOM Pacific Joint Training  
Strategy

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Military participation in school activities (reading weeks, career fairs, etc) is a highly effective community relations tool at the “grass roots” level.

ANNEX A, *Strategic Communication*  
to USPACOM Pacific Joint Training  
Strategy

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- Garnering public trust and support of training activities is a continuous process. As units implement communication and community outreach plans designed to educate opinion leaders and the public of the importance of training activities, they should regularly evaluate status of support and make course corrections to plans

ANNEX A, *Strategic Communication*  
to USPACOM Pacific Joint Training  
Strategy

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- These aren't just civic actions
- The overarching goal of the Pacific Joint Training Strategy is to ensure U.S. forces are ready to respond promptly and effectively to any and all contingencies that may confront our nation.

UNITED STATES PACIFIC  
COMMAND PACIFIC JOINT  
TRAINING STRATEGY 2007

# VFA: Nature, Scope, Problems

- “U.S. policy instruments in Mindanao include diplomacy, conditionality of U.S. economic and military assistance programs, **and more punitive measures on the counterterrorism front.**”

USIP, Philippine Facilitation Project (PFP) report

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- Signed in 2002 as a 5-year (but renewable) executive agreement between RP DND and US DOD.
- Government says it is a mere accounting agreement for the exchange of goods and services
- The MLSA was extended last November 2007, without even making public the government's evaluation of the agreement



# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- We say it allows US forces almost unrestricted use of Philippine facilities for their ‘basing’ and ‘logistics’ needs. The MLSA compliments the VFA. The latter being a legal framework for the stationing of troops, while the former is the legal framework for the setting up of facilities to support the stationed troops.

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- With the VFA and MLSA put together, it's as if the US bases never left....
- This time however the design is more flexible and less costly to maintain and does not pose an open target for critics of US foreign policy.

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- While the MLSA does not allow the setting up of permanent structures, it allows US troops to make use of Philippine facilities during their stay in the country

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- With US troops constantly present in the Philippines, these US facilities can no longer be considered “temporary” structures. In fact these structures inside AFP camps are already “permanently occupied” by the US forces.

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- Based on reports by Kawagib Human Rights Center in Mindanao, the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines has its headquarters inside Camp Navarro in Zamboanga

# MLSA: nature, scope, problems

- “Their infrastructures are sealed by walls, concertina wire, and sandbags. The actual size of the area could not immediately be seen from the outside. Their communication facilities (satellite dishes, antenna, and other instruments) are visible.”

-Kawagib report

# SEB: nature, scope problems

- **RP-US Security Engagement Board** established in May 2006
- “the SEB shall serve as the mechanism for consultation and planning of measures and arrangements focused on addressing non-traditional security concerns...”
- “SEB shall recommend these activities for consideration and approval by the RP government in accordance with the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)”

# SEB: nature, scope problems

- “Non-traditional security concerns are current and emerging security threats such as **international terrorism, transnational crimes, maritime safety and security, natural and man-made disasters,** and the threat of a pandemic outbreak that arise from **non-state actors and transcend national borders.**”



# Observations

- RP foreign policy shows unabashed puppetry and dependence on US
- The Philippine and US governments have sought to take away the gains achieved in the struggle to remove US military bases in the Philippines

# Observations

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- The Arroyo government set a new record of sorts in terms of allowing US military intervention and in terms of agreements forged with the US

