



IDSS COMMENTARIES (30/2004)

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Beyond the Iraq Hostage Crisis: Re-Assessing US-Philippine Relations

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28 July 2004

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

One of the possible fall-outs of the Philippines' action is a re-assessment of US-Philippines relations that had recently been revitalised after a decade-long hiatus following the closure of US military bases in the country in 1991. US 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 in the days ahead.

All Politics are Local

It bears reiterating here the dictum of former US House of Representative Speaker Tip O'Neill that "all politics are local" in order to put into context the nature of this bilateral fall-out 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 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 what is at stake. As far as the Arroyo government is concerned, it has to convince Washington that being accountable to its domestic population was paramount, before it could convince them that an endeavour—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 of 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 US\$ 9 billion which 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 Angelo de la Cruz’s possible decapitation could have therefore triggered a cataclysmic backlash by this massive force and would have brought down Arroyo’s fledgling administration that was and is still struggling to consolidate its hold on power after a hotly contested electoral result. More importantly, ignoring the potential risks could have also provided just the right fodder for the communist and Muslim insurgents to once again mount their campaign to destabilise the government. A quick scan of the Philippine political scene would have also revealed the possible coalition of militant labour unions, nationalist activists and many other groups who would exploit this weakness to bring down a newly-elected government that was perceived to be more concerned with maintaining international credibility rather than domestic legitimacy.

In short, the hostage crisis happened at the worst time, when the country and its government were most vulnerable. Unlike its Asian neighbours such as Japan and Korea, the Philippines is a weak state, enfeebled by the fact that it is captured by many strong interests at present. 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 US-led coalition. The picture becomes more complex when the imperatives of meeting domestic demands had to be weighed against the necessity of upholding its commitment to an international cause—especially when the basis of fighting this cause, like the war in Iraq, is increasingly put in doubt.

Hence, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s recent statement that ‘weakness is provocative’ should indeed be heeded—but, for different reasons. Indeed, it is precisely because a state is weak (not only politically but in security and economic terms) that it needs to be helped, and that rushing into punitive actions for renegeing on a commitment could be counter-productive. Weak states have narrow options and any expectations of solid commitments from them by a powerful state like the US might need more circumspection, given the volatile politics that beset weak states at any time.

Wither US-Philippine Relations post-hostage crisis?

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 considerations of the consequences of joining and participating in the coalition of the willing. Going by the sentiments expressed by many Filipino nationalists, the lessons of the US-Philippine Military Bases Agreement (MBA) of 1947 that allowed for the stationing of US 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 periodically 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 the ‘bases of the country’s insecurity’ because the Philippines was going to be caught in great power rivalries and would be exposed to the possibility of a nuclear conflict between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The presence of US military bases in the country therefore became a useful propaganda tool for the Left to foment discord and instability in the country. As argued in a previous commentary, there is a close parallel between the national protests then and the kinds of protests and discourses heard across the country today with regard to the US-Philippine bilateral 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

While not absolving the Philippines for going back on its international commitment, and despite the domestic reverberations regarding the country’s close ties with the US, the onus is clearly on the Arroyo government to convince Washington that the country remains committed to the global fight against terrorism. This would mean that beyond trying to justify its actions in Iraq as Arroyo had done in her State of the Nation Address on 26 July 2004, the government should now seriously confront the problem on two fronts.

Firstly, it has to show visible progress in its own local war against terrorism by being on top of the situation *vis a vis* the dangers posed by local groups who are reported to have links with terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah. Arguably, Arroyo could insist that the fight against terrorism begins at home. But, the Philippine military, being the major recipient of US 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 US cannot now afford to leave the Philippines alone in this battle. Any cutting off of aid to the country would not serve their 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.

Secondly, there is the much bigger challenge for the Arroyo government to take the country out of 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 destabilise any regime. It is *sine qua non* for any credible government to decisively respond to these challenges to enable it to stand in good stead with the rest of its neighbours who could take a no-nonsense approach in dealing with problems like terrorism.

More importantly, regardless of media hype, it is necessary for both the US and the Philippines to realise that their bilateral relations are not based on a single issue alone but on larger, multifaceted interests. Both states, and perhaps the United States in particular, must be able to assess the depth of this bilateral relationship in order to determine, rather than confuse, who their real friends and enemies are. Hopefully, it is the maturity of this bilateral relationship that could weather a crisis of this nature and allow both countries to forge ahead on the basis of their shared commitment to peace and security.

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