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Living in the Shadow of the Hegemon: Philippine-Australian Relations and the Global War against Terrorism

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Abstract
Studies of Philippine-Australian affairs over the years – and there have been some - concentrate on particular aspects of the relationship or else examine the topic within a broader Asia-Pacific context. The former include the Mail-Order-Bride issue, incidents like the Vivian Solon case, and shared interest in transnational crime; the latter have been mainly preoccupied with ASEAN and other regional partnerships as well as the role of the great powers. For the Philippines, Australia has become a southern alternative to the United States as a place of hope and opportunity. The White Australia Policy and the neocolonial connection of the Philippines with the US encouraged quaint forms of contact which were really no relationship at all.

Australia, on the other hand, always regarded the Philippines as “the other archipelago” slightly outside the Arc of Crisis. We refused to allow brown people to join ANZUS, overlooked the country when we gazed northwards, and quickly turned ignorance into policy. But this paper is concerned with the bilateral relationship as it has recently been shaped and determined by the role of the United States - and by the hegemon’s recent obsession with the Global War on Terrorism (or GWOT, surely the world’s ugliest acronym).

There is a vague conceit that both Australia and the Philippines have similar attitudes about their place in the Asia-Pacific. Both are island nations located off the mainland coast. In a shrinking world, that fact has led to a shared regional view about threats and challenges. But GWOT has taken over, setting the agenda within which the bilateral relationship must operate. The tensions thus created are without precedent. Above all, the Australian notion of pre-emptive strike has created a situation whereby the so-called regional Deputy Sheriff might invade Mindanao at some stage, already converting the troubled island into a military and commercial fiefdom. My concern is to investigate the factors which have persuaded Australian authorities to move away from a previous commitment to collective engagement with Southeast Asia and to adopt instead a derivative mini-version of American unilateralism.

This paper is concerned with the Australia-Philippines relationship as it is currently being reshaped and determined by the United States and its obsession with the global war on terrorism (or GWOT, surely the world’s ugliest acronym). Australian foreign policy was alleged to have matured during the immediate Cold War period. Successive governments led the nation into a new and deeper engagement with Asia. Such initiatives have suffered catastrophic damage since; whether short term or more lasting remains to be seen. “These have been years of serious loss of diplomatic capital for Australia, and of increasing risk to the security of Australians”, the irascible Tony Kevin has noted. “… In his panic rush to lodge Australia under the
military umbrella of a wounded and vengeful US government, John Howard tore up the international rule book on which Australia’s security so much depends”.¹

My paper does not examine the Australia-Philippine connection as a whole. A thorough review would be informative, but far beyond the scope of this modest study. The purpose here is quite specific: To consider strategic aspects of a relationship which is frequently overshadowed by each party’s engagement with the world’s sole superpower – and its ever-present terrorism agenda. This is an investigation in large part of something which has been called military diplomacy, a phenomenon which has assumed prominence by drawing upon the Western preoccupation with GWOT. Along with anti-terrorism, this paper warns, military diplomacy can subsume everything else.

The pre-9/11 situation was essentially positive and optimistic. The United States had emerged as much an umpire as a player in international affairs. It was clearly willing to underwrite the stability of the Western Pacific. As Douglas Lovelace noted in March 2000:

The Asia-Pacific region has become increasingly central to US national security concerns. The drawdown of US forces that began in the mid-1970s has not translated into a decline in US interest or engagement in the Asia-Pacific. The United States continues to have a significant forward presence, steadfast allies, and thriving trade and investment in countries throughout the region.

The focus was clearly on China, Japan, and Northeast Asia. Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzell especially emphasized the role of the United States as a security guarantor and regional balancer.² In the years since, however, Washington’s interest has broadened to include Australia and the Philippines as partners in the global war on terrorism.

Observers have overwhelmingly stressed the changes ushered in by the events of September 11, 2001. Yet the continuities are often more obvious than the discontinuities. The attacks on New York and Washington seem only to have speeded up and confirmed a certain process rather than sending the US off in new directions. The Bush administration seized the opportunity to toughen domestic protection (Homeland Security) and promote unilateral preemption abroad. Those who believe that these developments represent some sort of sea change do not understand where the US was heading all along. Nonetheless, some commentators have suggested there was a brief moment when farsighted Western goodwill might have dampened Muslim


unrest in places like the southern Philippines - if only Washington had enlisted the European Union and other First World nations like Australia to achieve such an end. It did not happen.3

So the first challenge for Australia and the Philippines has involved dealing with US implacability. “If we have to go into fifteen countries we ought to do it”, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared boldly in January 2002. The SecDef’s threat was surely no more than posturing even then. In a more conciliatory (if less grammatical) tone, he spoke “of accepting help from any country on a basis that is comfortable for them and allowing them to characterize what they are doing to help us instead of us characterizing it for them”.4 But there was menace behind his words. Over several years, the Americans have threatened to open a second front in the southern Philippines, yet so far they have not invaded Mindanao. This is a cause of puzzlement throughout the island itself, but the explanation is simple enough. Washington has found neither the wherewithal nor the determination to launch a preemptive strike outside of the Middle East. In what appears to be a case of imperial overstretch, sheer necessity will eventually lead to diplomacy imposing itself over armed intervention.

Meanwhile, 2006 marks the 60th anniversary of the Australia-Philippines relationship. While dignitaries celebrate the occasion, it serves as a reminder that the strategic part of the connection emerged from the ANZUS saga of the postwar years. Formal relations were established between the autonomous Southwest Pacific dominion and the fledgling Asian republic in 1946, but its parameters were beaten out a little later as both nations sought to promote a regional pact and to achieve some sort of security agreement with the United States.

The Philippines actually acted rather prematurely by sponsoring the Baguio conference. Foreign Secretary Carlos Romulo was the newly-appointed President of the UN General Assembly, which undoubtedly led to some ill-considered diplomatic assertiveness. Most Southeast Asian states were willing to await a lead from the United States. Whatever the case, the Baguio meeting sank without trace, Washington having sought “possibilities for evasion” rather than any involvement whatsoever.5

Australia shared an American view that the Philippines was part of an off-shore island chain which could form an important stop-line to contain communism. In this respect, it also accepted the US coda that insular Southeast Asia was more important than was the mainland. “I would be attracted by the notion of a Pacific Defence Council limited to the Island Nations of the Pacific”, Prime Minister Menzies


5 Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Butterworth) to the Secretary of State, January 16, 1950; Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, volume VI: East Asia & the Pacific (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), 3.
decided, “… [but] I do not really believe either the Philippines or Indonesia has a sufficiently stable Government to be a usefully contributing partner”. Although Canberra was wary of the Philippines, “its evident strategic importance to Australia is such that we are forced here and now to overcome any political ‘queasiness’ about supporting a government without reservation”.

ANZUS had been at the core of those bygone considerations. Canberra in the postwar years wanted an alliance of white nations in the Southwest Pacific and would accept no substitute; Washington watched helplessly as an omnibus proposal to incorporate the virulently anticommunist Philippines into ANZUS (PANZUS?) came unstuck on racial and strategic grounds. Regarding the security challenges facing Southeast Asia, Menzies pointed out “that conclusion of a pact is not the only way of helping these countries”. He hoped that the US and Britain would provide increased aid to the area and suggested that Canberra should promote such initiatives without “extending Australian military obligations in Asia”.

Other factors played a part, too. Anti-communist fervor has to be factored into the story, for example. Certainly participation in the Manila Pact and membership of SEATO was significant for both nations. During the Cold War years they collaborated in creating a nefarious Asian version of containment. Australia was something of a supervisory partner, leading it to make some terrible compromises with the Marcos dictatorship. One scholar noted: “ASIO also gave special assistance to Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines, training their security police and providing them with equipment. Needless to say all three were essentially secret police institutions which used violent repression”. ASIO also maintained a special relationship with the notorious Philippines National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA).  

Australia’s relationship with the Philippines is still determined in part by ASEAN, which has acted as an important player in its own right. This regional alliance was created in 1967 with the Philippines as one of the “forming five”. Along with the US, the European Union, and others, Australia has become a dialogue partner. Its interest in ASEAN has been less than enthusiastic, however, and there has been a bipartisan tendency to work through APEC and to regard this as a larger Asia-Pacific rival to Southeast Asian cooperation.

Meanwhile, ASEAN aspired to become a trade bloc rivaling the US and the European Union. Australia has remained suspicious of such aspirations. In late 2004 Canberra refused to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) between ASEAN and its neighbors. The Philippines led the criticism of this decision. According to Tony Kevin at the time, Australia was viewed as recalcitrant on regional confidence building; in the end, “Australia is the United States deputy sheriff, and … this is where we want to be”. In fact, the Canberra has always leaned towards

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6 Cablegram from R.G.Menzies to Percy Spender, Colombo, February 6, 1951, minute from Defence Secretary Arthur Tange to Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Watt, Canberra, February 8, 1951; & cablegram from Prime Minister Menzies to Minister for External Affairs Casey, Canberra, November 8, 1951; in Roger Holdich, et.al. (editors), The ANZUS Treaty 1951 (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001), 56-57 & 210.

7 David McKnight, Australia’s Spies and Their Secrets (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 223.
bilateralism and was consequently reluctant to join this non-aggression pact. Prime Minister Howard said “it’s the substance of the relationship we have with individual countries that really matters”. He damned the treaty as a relic of the Cold War. Australian leaders were also concerned about provisions against interference in the internal affairs of other signatories, something which clearly compromised the principle of pre-emptive action against another state in the case of a terrorist threat.8

Late the following year, fearful of being left on the periphery at the East Asian Summit, Australia reluctantly signed the TAC. Commentators like former ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino regarded this as an embarrassing about-face. But participation in the East Asian Summit had been secured. It broadened initiatives like the Philippine-Australia Dialogue (PAD) and the bilateral Regional Security Dialogue. The 2006 meeting of the East Asian Summit will be held in Cebu, Philippines, at year’s end.

Now, more than fifty years after the signing of the Australia-New Zealand-US security agreement, it has been invoked in reverse to the original intention, with the Southwest Pacific dominions going to the aid of the wounded hegemon. The key to unlocking the Canberra mindset remains the centrality of American requirements. Robert Manne has contended that the Howard government actually abandoned ambitions to integrate more deeply with neighbors as part of a realignment of Australian policy. “What has been so strange and dispiriting about the Howard government’s trajectory since September 11 has been the reversion to [a] kind of dependent relationship with the new global imperial power, the US”.9

Meanwhile, the challenge in recounting the story of the relationship between Australia and the Philippines is to get the balance right. Two nations might have a mutually valuable security arrangement, but little social and cultural interaction. The opposite could also be true. But most relations between states take place to a greater or lesser extent across the broad spectrum of politico-diplomatic, economic, and social affairs. In the case of Australia and the Philippines, the tale is told quite adequately in official handouts.10

This paper is interested in something more specific; namely, the way in which that relationship has been determined by and infused with a special concern about the US role in the Western Pacific. The process is in this case illustrated by two

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developments. First, changes in the military dimension are considered in order to assess the tectonic shift in Australian foreign policy towards preemption and unilateralism. Second, decision-making in Canberra regarding development programs and overseas investment are examined to show that recent trends have subsumed aid and trade into a significant new realpolitik. My approach gives a primacy to things Australian over things Filipino, but this merely reflects and responds to general perceptions of relations between the West and the Rest.

Filipinos with their penchant for mimicry of American ways and their prevalent desire to migrate to the United States do not comfortably inhabit the world of the Rest save only in regard to their appallingly high levels of hunger and poverty. But this is enough. Various commentators have warned of a coming crisis provoked by the fact that Westerners “inhabit islands of comfort … threatened by a tidal wave of criminal anarchy on the part of the masses of alien races and cultures”. While this debate goes on, Australia and the Philippines clearly remain on opposite sides of the chasm between stability, opportunity and plenty on one hand, turmoil, dispossession and despair on the other. Socio-economic disparities provide a backdrop for everything else.

The purpose here, nonetheless, is to investigate the role and impact of the global war on terrorism as a common cause; that is, the way in which the anti-terrorism campaign has brought together two disparate nation states and apparently created a shared, transcendent purpose under the umbrella of the hegemonic power. Differences have seemed to diminish in importance under a barrage of GWOT initiatives. The long-term effects can only be guessed at, but the short-term ones are perplexing. Whatever else, the pressures being brought to bear on the Australian-Philippine relationship demonstrate the way in which the Asia Pacific has been drawn into a broader, darker and more dangerous set of circumstances, its own best interests subsumed thereby.

Both countries have supposedly similar attitudes about their place in the Asia-Pacific. Each feels culturally isolated from its neighborhood. Perhaps more significantly, both are island nations located off the mainland coast. In a shrinking world, that fact has led to a shared regional view about threats and challenges. This paper examines those issues with a view to understanding some of the extraordinary developments which are presently unfolding, especially in regard to secessionist struggles nearby - something which might be called Australia’s strategic nightmare. That Australians exhibit immense anxiety about Indonesia requires no explanation. But why are we planning to invade Mindanao? Is it merely an outgrowth of our concerns about Indonesia and about unbridled terrorism or is there another dimension to this amazing story?


12 These questions are not asked in jest. Circumstantial evidence suggests the US decision to intervene in the southern Philippines has been handed off to Australia in the years since 9/11. My contention is that such important matters should be exercising the public mind and featuring in the public debate far more than at present.
An important role has been played by domestic developments which allowed the Howard team to convince Australians that they had been pleasant enough for long enough to the less fortunate folk of the region; in a terrible parody of an inspiring battle cry in antipodean political history, they declared It’s Time … for border control. Australians became persuaded that their immediate past was a dark and dangerous place from which they had been rescued by the 1996 return to Menzies-like verities.

Prevalent Western assumptions about world affairs tend to set the scene. Having decided that “American hegemony has been strengthened so much that it now acts as a significant check on regional conflicts”, Amitav Acharya proposed a very convoluted and disturbing argument about American risk analysis in Southeast Asia:

> Throughout Asia, transnational terrorist networks are filling in as the common threat against which states can build new networks of security cooperation. Already this has led renewed American strategic engagement in Southeast Asia; something regional governments, if not their peoples generally, regard as a positive force for regional stability.

Acharya seems at ease with various ethical issues which have caused widespread alarm in the Philippines, one of the nations which caught his attention. He set up democratization to construct a very unsatisfactory argument about terrorism in Southeast Asia:

> The response of Southeast Asian governments to terrorism provides ammunition to those who see democratization as part of the problem, rather than the solution, in confronting the terrorist challenge. The case for democratization is undermined when one compares the responses of Malaysia and Singapore (with swift detention under the ISA) with that of Indonesia and the Philippines.13

This is a very Western viewpoint which blithely measures peoples’ freedoms against a perceived advantage which might be provided for terrorists. It is difficult to comment on the maelstrom of Indonesian politics, but anyone who discerns democratization as a factor in the Philippine nightmare simply has not studied the situation carefully enough.

Meanwhile, Australia and the Philippines became early members of the Coalition of the Willing. Both participated in the invasion of Iraq. But the tiny Philippine contingent was withdrawn slightly earlier than planned after a Filipino truck driver was kidnapped. Coming at the same time as similar action by Spain gave extra bite to the decision. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer overreacted. He described the Philippines as a marshmallow and warned that allies remaining in Iraq “would pay the price” because Manila had surrendered to militants. He blamed the withdrawal for a terrorist threat to turn Australia into “pools of blood”. From the

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Philippine side, then-National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzalez called Downer narrow minded. “Instead of looking for scapegoats”, Gonzalez said, “Australia should re-examine why the Iraq insurgency had persisted and intensified”. The diplomatic imbroglio which now unfolded was difficult, reflecting the extent to which Australia was reluctant to concede freedom of action to itself or its neighbor. The Philippines defied tremendous American pressure; Australia did not.14

Despite the diplomatic imbroglio, sea exercises were held only a month later to enhance operational readiness between the Philippine and Australian navies. The pragmatic, security-obsessed view of Australian-Philippine relations is underwritten and buttressed by GWOT. It will probably prevail for years, working against a connection which is fragile at best – and certainly helping to keep Australia at daggers drawn with its neighbors. Perhaps the most sanguine reading of things has come from Rommel Banlaoi of the National Defense College in Manila, who writes of “Australia’s overarching strategy of expanding its bilateral relations in Southeast Asia to advance its national interests which are perceived to be threatened by traditional and non-traditional security issues in Asia, particularly the spectre of international terrorism”. Banlaoi is brutally frank about the strategic dimension of the Philippine-Australian connection; his concern is solely with this aspect of the bilateral relationship. He is on more dangerous ground, however, when he points to “geographic proximity and cultural familiarity”. In truth, both these factors are extremely problematic.

Banlaoi argues his case with missionary zeal (he has recently been a player in the drama himself, as he reiterates several times). When he quotes the Australian Embassy, he blithely incorporates conjecture into the story along with a basic cause for the bitter secessionist struggle in the Muslim south of his own homeland: “The Philippines, as a democratic, predominantly Christian country with a long exposure to Western culture and a relatively well-educated, English-speaking population, has much in common with Australia”.15

In telling his tale, Banlaoi is nothing if not selective. He has quoted an innocuous comment by Alexander Downer in 1998, for example; he chose not to mention any of the foreign minister’s ripe, expletive-deleted remarks over the withdrawal of the Filipino contingent from Iraq in 2003. And reference to shared experiences in East Timor is disingenuous to say the least. The Filipinos were withdrawn in disgrace after a black marketeering scandal; the Australians are still bogged down in what might yet become their own mini-Iraq. Any shared experiences were decidedly negative in nature.

Banlaoi argued that the global war on terrorism has reinforced bonds between Australia and the Philippines. He pointed out that they signed a Memorandum of

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14 Mark Metherell, “Downer Blames Iraq Pullouts for Threat”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 26, 2004. The press understandably had a field day and much publicity was given to the contretemps throughout mid-2004. Particularly galling for the Howard government was the fact that much Australian opinion favored Manila’s action.

Understanding to Combat International Terrorism in March 2003 because of the convergence of their strategic aims. The two countries certainly undertook a range of commitments under the terms of the MOU.

Banlaoi’s conclusion could be anticipated easily enough: “This relationship must necessarily include the broadening of their defence relations which can contribute ultimately towards a stronger security architecture in Southeast Asia necessary for the promotion of regional peace and stability”.16 A blurring often occurs at this point. Is a commentator like Banlaoi referring to a general stance against adverse external forces or to the suppression of internal threats and insurgencies within partner states?

Meanwhile, the United States is anxious to use its bilateral relations with Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines to construct a comprehensive security network throughout the region. It aims to achieve this end through Exercise Team Challenge “designed to improve interoperability among participating armed forces and join existing bilateral Joint and Combined exercises between US Pacific Command and the armed forces of Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand”.17 ECT has already incorporated existing two-power arrangements like Tandem Thrust (US and Australia), Cobra Gold (US and Thailand), and Balikatan (US and the Philippines). Canada participated in maritime training as well. Where such initiatives may go in the future and to what extent joint and combined operations continue to be held in the Asia Pacific depends a great deal on long-term planning in Washington. At least one tentative judgment can be made: More than the anti-terrorism impulse is at work here.

The United States is, in fact, as concerned about the intentions of China as ever it was, one recent commentator alleging that the two powers “are shadowboxing each other for influence and status in the Asia Pacific”. This gamesmanship does “not drive each and every US or Chinese policy action in Asia, but mutual hedging is fast becoming a core and perhaps even defining dynamic between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region”.18 The prolific Banlaoi has also contended that an important feature of GWOT in Southeast Asia is the effort to oppose and contain Chinese military adventurism. This objective in turn enlists a response from within the region. Analysts have noted that “some ASEAN states may seek reassurance from the United States and tangible signs of US military support”. The anti-terrorism effort suddenly seems less significant, even if “such requests are likely to be modest and intended primarily ‘to keep China honest’ rather than create a robust war-fighting capability through the establishment of US bases or a permanent land-based US military presence”.19

16 Ibid., 480-486 passim.
17 “Exercise Team Challenge” http://www.apan-info.net/exercises/default.asp
19 Rommel C. Banlaoi, The War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia (Manila: Rex Book Store, 2004), especially chapter 4: American Strategic Intentions in the War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia; & Richard Sokolsky, Angel Rabasa, & C. Richard Neu, The Role of Southeast Asia in US Strategy toward China (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), 72. This pre-9/11 assertion has
The antipodean position may be more singular and straightforward, geography serving to underpin a preoccupation with the terrorism scourge. For many Australians, including Foreign Minister Downer, terrorism is something which can emerge with frightening speed - like boat people and Avian Flu - from our Southeast Asian neighbors. Downer’s persistent imagery, in fact, paints Australia as an island in a sea of whatever horror happens to be under debate. With terrorism itself, he clearly regards archipelagic realities as a threat. “It’s not a question of just sending a battleship”, he emphasized recently. The nature of the challenge is considerable:

We have people working in the Philippines assisting the Philippine authorities in improving their capacity to monitor people in and out of the Philippines and we’ve been doing that for quite some time. The Philippine and Indonesian authorities are only too aware that … terrorists may very well be moving between their countries – and efforts are being made to try to stop that, or equally between the Philippines and Malaysia. So continual efforts have to be made but the dimensions of the problem … are enormous and the political will is there.

Downer expressed concern about the situation in Mindanao and pointed out that Australia was helping the Philippine government to address the matter. Then and now, however, the minister remains vague on details about the problem or the means to solve it.

There can be no doubt that Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Downer are seeking to redefine Australia’s status away from the traditional notion of a middle power. The literature on this concept is considerable, but local neo-cons want to push beyond the standard interpretation by asserting a power continuum which places Australia in a leadership position well ahead of its neighbors. Downer accused his Labor opponents of fostering the myth of “Little Australia”, arguing instead “that we are not just a ‘middle power’”. Steadfastness as an ally of the hegemon and “a willingness to meet our global commitments” have apparently earned Australia a high status in the Asia Pacific.

The relationship with the Philippines falls squarely within the purview of this type of thinking. Negotiations too often seem to grow from a First World sense of tutelage, as through the Philippine-Australian Defence Cooperation Working Group. Some observers insist the most critical feature of the relationship during 2005 and 2006 has been the absence of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Policy dialogues, track two and track three (or unofficial) diplomacy, and many other initiatives have been maintained in more recent literature, indicating that the Twin Towers attacks were not such a sharp divide in this regard. See, inter alia, Carola McGiffert (editor), China in the American Political Imagination (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2003).


inevitably build upon military exercises and intelligence gathering operations. Even AusAID laments that “[t]he fragile security situation is … a major concern”, noting that it was terrorism that “brought the Philippines sharply ‘onto the radar screen’”.  

Various commentators have argued that the end of the Cold War created a high level of uncertainty in the Western Pacific. Trouble spots developed a new potency with the removal of the calming effects of superpower rivalry. In this respect, the Philippines is located slightly outside our so-called Arc of Crisis, but the Howard government has become increasingly alarmed about its fragility as a nation state. More generally, John Birmingham concluded: “It has taken more than two hundred years, but in finally confronting a world full of both threat and opportunity, it may be that Australians have come to a point at last where they feel confident not just of their place in the world but, more importantly, of their ability to act decisively in it”. Having a bet each way, he added: “Whether that confidence is soundly based, however, is another matter”.  

This tension has been aggravated by developments in the Philippines. Following a media barrage occasioned by the Bali bombings, former Defence Minister Robert Hill appeared ready to commit Australian troops to Mindanao before realizing that no SOFA was in place. Australian troops have participated with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Exercise Dawn Caracha/Kasangga for several years, but Hill was proposing company level or live-fire operational involvement. This premature announcement was a very embarrassing gaffe; it seemed to cause friction with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who feigned ignorance of the whole initiative. 

During a brief visit to Zamboanga, Senator Hill played down preemptive strike and sought to link his suggestion with the idea of self-defence, especially in dealing with a threat “that is more difficult to identify, doesn’t wear uniforms, and doesn’t operate under a formal command structure”.  

Although he claimed to be addressing terrorism, he was speaking the language of counterinsurgency. Hill expressed the hope that Australia would be a full participant in the massive US-Philippine Balikatan exercises by this year. He made a series of proposals at the same time. The SAS, whose commander Major General Mike Hindmarsh was also in western Mindanao, would train AFP units in Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols. A second aspect involves enhancing the Philippine army’s ability to hunt so-called high value targets. This raises matters involving riverine surveillance and anti-piracy measures. 

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25 Australia is donating thirty river boats to the Philippine Navy to help in the quest for terrorists in the marshlands of Mindanao. For the broader nautical dimension, see Rommel C. Banlaoi,
Another feature of Australian engagement includes a A$10 million assistance package for forensic and intelligence training. Strong resistance within the Philippine Senate, however, suggests widespread misgivings about the entire program.

Hill particularly mentioned cooperating with the Barangay Intelligence Network. Tasked with information gathering, this rightwing vigilante formation is notorious for HR abuses and is deployed primarily to keep check on remote villages. It includes cultist gangs capable of extraordinary violence against anyone discerned to be a threat to the near-feudal status quo – or to foreign commercial interests. The dreaded Iliga [Rats] of an earlier time have been resurrected as the Bagong Iliga [New Rats]. Incidents of ritualistic cannibalism are not uncommon. If Australian soldiers are to participate in long-range patrols to neutralize community organizers identified by an upgraded BIN, they will deservedly draw the attention of the International Criminal Court. The most disturbing feature of this Boys’ Own adventurism is that Senator Hill in background briefings must have been informed about the nature of the brutal paramilitary forces engaged in pacification across western Mindanao. There again, he may have believed merely that he had wandered onto the set of “Apocalypse Now”!

Senator Hill’s visit to the southern Philippines was clearly intended to provide some direction for antiterrorism initiatives which were flagging. Above all, the lack of a SOFA seemed to have brought Australian intervention to an end. The Philippine Senate, extremely sensitive to anything which could be construed as a slight to national sovereignty, was turning up the heat.

Hill denied the presence of Australian troops in Mindanao and linked unilateral action to self defence:

The so-called pre-emptive strike is really part of the doctrine of self defence in the UN Charter as it now exists applied to contemporary threats: The threat of terrorism where you don’t have the timelines that you once had in relation to conventional threats, the need to be able to move more quickly against a threat that is more difficult to identify, doesn’t wear uniforms, and doesn’t operate under a formal command structure. So nothing’s changed in that regard, we all have a right of responsibility to self defence and we exercise that responsibility in accordance with the rules of the charter.26

Hill was awkward and uncomfortable throughout this interview, clearly straying into uncharted waters and trying to say as little as possible. The thrust of his message was clearly along the lines that nothing has changed, everything has changed.


26 Transcript of a joint media conference with Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill and Philippine Defense Secretary Avelino Cruz, Manila, October 18, 2005; see http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2005/181005.doc
As Australia’s own neoconservative mavens rewrote history, foreign policy came in for significant reforms of its own. Events in East Timor alone ensured that the liberals would remain in hiding while the alleged Jakarta lobby reasserted itself. The deputy sheriff of the Pacific hastily fashioned a mini-version of unilateralism and preemption. “So enthusiastic was [the Howard] government about the new doctrine of ‘pre-emptive strike’”, Robert Manne reported, “that the Prime Minister even applied it – clumsily, purposelessly and at considerable diplomatic cost – to a hypothetical presence somewhere in South-East Asia of an anti-Australian terrorist cell”.27

In the event, Australia’s regional policy can be largely assessed by deconstructing the recent speeches of Prime Minister Howard. In an address to the Lowy Institute in March 2005, he declared:

> From the murder of 88 Australians in Bali in October 2002 and the attack on our Jakarta Embassy last September, we know that the threat to our country is very real. Australia’s national security depends upon a collective response to this terrorist threat. Strong links with our partners in Asia form a vital part of this response. The war on terror is a different kind of war. It is a war against loose networks, neither dependent upon nation-state sponsors nor responsive to conventional deterrents.28

This amazing statement not only drew attention to the tectonic shift which has occurred in Australian foreign policy during the new century, but also points to the reasons for the change.

What has added grave criticality to discussion of the Australian-Philippine relationship was an early determination by the United States to invade Mindanao, an apparent reluctance to tackle that task, and a possible decision to pass the mission to reliable old Australia. An extraordinary outlook evolved with no basis in past policy and with no clear or publicly declared agenda. Washington has entered into a new arrangement with Manila, establishing a Security Engagement Board (SEB) in order to extend concern from external attack to “non-traditional” matters like terrorism, transnational crime, and disasters. For now, the counter-insurgency task remains with the AFP, one of the most abusive and corrupt military machines in the region. The Pentagon oversees a program of internal security, anti-terrorism, and PSYOPS (psychological operations) which together constitute a major pacification effort.29

Such strategic realities do not exist in a vacuum, of course. Broader concerns must be heeded. It is difficult - albeit imperative - to fit the economic dimension into


28 The US State Department chose to quote this awkward piece of Howardese as a preface to the East Asia and Pacific Overview in its *Annual Country Reports on Terrorism Released for 2005*.

the picture. A vigorous debate rages around aid and trade, the sides understandably dividing along political lines. The conservative case prevails, maintaining that foreign investment and economic reform are good for Third World countries. The best that can be said for this argument would be that it is extremely self-serving; in the end, the figures do not bear out the claim. The Philippine situation is made worse by a battery of Marcos-era loans which are still being paid off. After decades of so-called reforms, the economy floats on repatriated funds from overseas workers and most of the earnings go towards maintaining the armed forces.

Whatever might be wrong with the progressive viewpoint, it has overwhelming popular support on the ground. Australia has failed to appreciate this painful fact of life, even attempting on occasion to rectify it – or, at least, to ignore it. But economic issues require consideration because aid and trade are being increasingly subsumed into the global war on terrorism through changes in the way counterinsurgency is being defined and practiced. There can be no doubt, for example, that overseas commercial incursions into Mindanao are being promoted as something good and useful in fighting Islamic extremism. Terrorists thrive in circumstances of poverty and backwardness, according to this assertion, so foreign investment can only be helpful because it contributes to prosperity and growth.30

It will be a long time before anything approximating equity and mutual respect drive the Australian-Philippine relationship. For mainstream interests and the diplomatic establishment to pretend otherwise is dishonest, discouraging and disreputable. The United States has clearly delegated a constabulary role to Australia in the Western Pacific, placing it in a privileged position in relation to neighbors. Reactionary, xenophobic opinion in Australia has proven to be quite comfortable with this arrangement. The Philippines might be somewhat around the corner of mainland Asia as the geopolitical realities assert themselves, but the nation is widely perceived to be falling apart (it probably is) and the southern portion of the archipelago has been judged a terrorist playground (it most definitely is not). The Fil-Am relationship, based as it is upon envy, suspicion, and immense amounts of neocolonial patronage and clientelism, is not about to be superseded by any contacts between the Philippines and Australia, but the latter has begun to be used by Washington as a useful way of maintaining control over the former.

Australian development assistance to the Philippines in 2005-2006 totals no less than A$64 million. Canberra has devised a A$10 million counter-terrorism package which builds upon previous programs. An inaugural Philippines-Australia Ministerial Meeting (PAMM) held in August 2005 discussed issues relating to terrorism, law enforcement, and maritime security. The Howard government has recently announced that it will donate spying equipment to the Philippine Immigration and Deportation Bureau. Many other initiatives are in train. They stem from the official Australian perception that the archipelagic security situation “is seriously undermining development efforts”.31

30 Americans have made the connection very strongly, deciding that trade and assistance to the Third World addresses “root causes of terrorism”. See USAID, Philippines Strategy FY 2005 – 2009, March 14, 2005, 1.

Australia will not willingly accept any more mini-states in its neighborhood; secessionism is a disease which must be stamped out. The Howard government’s position is clear and was illustrated by the reaction to the crisis in East Timor. Canberra refused for as long as possible to acknowledge the realities unfolding in East Timor because these compromised relations with Indonesia so badly. The Philippines is not so centrally located in the Australian consciousness. The stakes are apparently not so high. On the one hand, this could make for enlightened, unambiguous policy; on the other, the shibboleth of secession is no less frightening in the case of Mindanao than with Aceh or West Papua. Yet again, the United States and its anti-terrorism agenda also intrude into the reckoning.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of formal relations between Australia and the Philippines (and after more than a century of informal contacts), it is still too early to talk about defence and strategic ties contributing to deeper political and socio-economic relations. Rommel Banlaot’s theory - that the two countries have been led to a better and fuller understanding as a consequence of their participation in the Coalition of the Willing - is dangerously overstated. A more skeptical view than his might focus on the Australian tendency to see only terrorist hubs in Mindanao while the island itself braces for the long-threatened invasion by the Western alliance. The Philippine-Australia relationship rests upon numerous other issues as well. It will probably gain strength and resilience over the long-term, but this is not certain and much hard work will need to be done to achieve such an end. That effort must begin with both countries transcending the American agenda currently being imposed in the name of GWOT and confronting the serious, persistent, substantive matter of regional instability without necessarily accepting the United States as the final arbiter thereof.