

The Expanded Nontraditional Role of the AFP

A Reassessment

BY DENCIO SEVERO ACOP

This article argues that the experiences of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) during decades of counterinsurgency have had both positive and negative consequences for the AFP as an institution, as well as for state-building in the Philippines. Positive experiences can be attributed to the AFP contribution of its military values to its external environment, while many of the negative experiences are accounted for by its expanded interaction with its external environment. This kind of interaction, though essential, managed to undermine its professionalism and values, specifically from graft and corruption. Furthermore, the article argues that though there are seemingly insurmountable problems, the situation for the AFP and the state is not entirely hopeless. This optimism lies in good leadership from the top, especially political leadership.

The article also examines the traditional role of the AFP. In doing so, it takes a look at its history of security and development and then its current national security challenges. To assess both the relevance and the adequacy of AFP participation and contribution to the overall developmental effort, the resource capacities of national civilian institutions and AFP are examined. This includes identifying public expectations of the AFP and risks associated with its expanded role. Essentially, the gaps between the AFP and civil government, civil society, and the average citizen are brought to light. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of findings.

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Traditional Role of the AFP

The National Defense Act of the Philippines specifies the traditional role of the AFP as defender of the state and protector of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This role is consistent with the universal role given to the armed forces of any country. Though formalized soon after the Philippines gained its independence from the United States in 1946, the AFP's less formal beginnings already saw defensive actions during the revolutionary war against its former colonial master Spain in 1896–1898, against the United States in 1899–1901, and against

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Japan during World War II. Following independence, the AFP defended the state against Filipino rebels who wanted to overthrow the government. Some degree of revolt has persisted to this day. The AFP decisively defeated the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and its military arm, the Huk army, in 1954 following an insurgency war that began in 1951. The AFP continues to fight the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its military arm, the New People's Army, which has rebelled against established authority since 1968. The AFP fought against the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in Mindanao from the early 1970s until 1996 when a peace treaty was signed. That notwithstanding, a breakaway faction called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has managed to wage war since 1975. In fact, although the MILF has taken part in peace talks with the government,

another breakaway group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement/Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, continues to wage war. Then, of course, there is the extremist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which continues to operate in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao and occasionally inflicts casualties on the AFP.

The AFP is neither as large nor technologically modern as most of its regional counterparts. In fact, it is arguably among the weakest militaries in the area. The army is the largest among the three branches of service, comprising some 10 infantry divisions with 3 brigades each.¹ The navy is next in size, followed by the air force with around 15,000 personnel.² While the army is relatively better equipped (probably because its equipment does not cost as much), the latter two branches leave much to be desired in terms of mission-essential gear. Since U.S. forces left in 1991, the AFP has experienced a serious degradation of its combat arsenal, including combat support and combat service support. Despite a modernization law in effect since 1995, the AFP has not become a more capable force. It has in fact deteriorated. Worse, the massive corruption within its ranks has not made the situation any better.

Nontraditional Role of the AFP

Although many believe that the nontraditional role of the AFP began with its developmental role during the martial law period under Ferdinand Marcos, the role actually began as early as 1951 during the Huk campaign when President Ramon Magsaysay, advised by Colonel Edward Lansdale and the Central Intelligence Agency, had the AFP adopt the “left-hand/right-hand” approach toward decisively defeating the original

AFP marine stands watch as USS *Chung-Hoon* arrives in Puerto Princesa to participate in Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training Philippines 2011



U.S. Navy (Robert Clowney)

communist insurgents in 1954. The left hand offered developmental projects to rebels who needed them, while the right hand firmly dealt with the rebels who refused and challenged the authority of the government. In fact, this highly successful formula of employing the security and developmental roles of the AFP became the blueprint for succeeding strategies against the insurgencies that carry over to this day. From that time forward, it was no longer strange to find support for national development, economic development, or law enforcement in AFP campaign plans.

History of Security and Development

The history of the AFP can be summarized as the history of using the blueprint of the left-hand/right-hand approach to resolving insurgencies. The period between the beginning of the Commonwealth Era in 1935 through World War II and independence in 1946 was largely characterized by the traditional role of the AFP, but all subsequent years saw variations of the left-hand/right-hand approach in action.

Confronted by the second communist insurgency posed by the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA), as well as the secessionist insurgencies from the MNLF and MILF, the pre-martial law years between 1946 and 1972 saw the AFP gradually assume participation in socioeconomic and occasional political functions and programs, such as election duties, nationwide civic action programs, expansion of engineering units, use of military C-130s

for socioeconomic purposes, extensive AFP involvement in infrastructure development, development and utilization of reservists along the citizen army provisions of the National Defense Act for socioeconomic purposes, the president-directed Home Defense Program unifying the AFP reserve force development, community relations, civil assistance, and agro-military activities.³

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The martial law period between 1972 and 1981 under Marcos intensified the direct participation of the AFP in governance. There were active-duty military officers who occupied what used to be elective or bureaucratic posts within the civilian government. Some officers sat as directors and managers of government owned or controlled corporations while concurrently occupying line or staff positions in the AFP. Still other officers performed as diplomats in Philippine embassies and consulates and listening posts overseas for years. AFP campaign plan Katatagan was written and implemented during this period. It signaled the beginnings of the triad concept or the synergistic employment of combat operations, intelligence, and civil-military operations. The involvement of the AFP in election duties continued during this time. Arguably, this involvement partly began the erosion of the AFP's core values, as was borne out by later consequences.⁴

The People Power Revolution on the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (or EDSA, the main highway of Metro Manila) in 1986

transformed the nontraditional role of the AFP. Up until that moment in Philippine history, the AFP merely played a developmental role that was limited to winning rebels back into mainstream society by supporting civilian government programs and projects. But suddenly in 1986, the AFP played a prominent part in regime change, thereby strategically affecting the lives of the citizenry in the years that followed through the kind of leadership that it helped install in power. Before accidentally helping reform the national leadership, the Reform the Armed Forces Movement, or the reformist faction of young and idealistic officers within the AFP, only sought to change their own organization.

The left-hand/right-hand approach continued following EDSA 1986, but this time with a fresh zeal of idealism untainted by the hypocrisy of the deposed regime. The involvement of the AFP in election duties also continued during this period. Realizing the need to first restore peace and order before any meaningful economic progress could take place, the new Aquino government was right to exploit its legitimacy toward pursuing fresh peace initiatives with the enemies of the state. It was in this spirit that Aquino tried to make peace with the Cordillera People's Liberation Army of Conrado Balweg in the north. To a great extent, the government was successful in making peace with the CPP/NPA breakaway group. The AFP was directed to support the government's program to establish a politically and economically stable country through reconciliation, protection of the people, economic and social improvement, and strong social structures based on valued institutions.⁵

Later, the government introduced field-validated enhancements into the security

and development strategy of the AFP, which resulted in significant results for the counter-insurgency campaign. The government aimed to decisively defeat the communist insurgency using the triad concept of civil military operations, combat operations, and intelligence operations. The plan was so successful that it cleared 13,000 affected communities between 1988 and 1994, but it encountered problems with the economic development phase.⁶

The other extreme of the transformed nontraditional role continued throughout the Aquino administration. Military rebels led by Colonel Gregorio Honasan launched a series of attempted power grabs between 1986 and 1989 that all failed. Accusing Aquino of being too friendly with the Left, Honasan and his cohorts aimed to form a ruling civilian-military junta wherein the military would play a major role.

The administration of Fidel Ramos took over from the Aquino regime in 1992 and immediately sought to make peace with any insurgent group that was receptive to the offer. Ramos, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, was a former general and defense chief who understood the importance of achieving strategic peace before any meaningful political stability and economic progress could take place. As chief of the Philippine constabulary for 14 years, Ramos understood the effectiveness of security and development toward achieving the goals of his administration. If Aquino's watch was plagued by one coup attempt after another, the Ramos presidency experienced no such threat.

Ramos made strategic peace with military rebels in 1992, appealing to them instead to positively affect Philippine development through nonviolent means. As a result, Letter of Instruction 42/94, "Unlad-Bayan," was

launched. This letter was the campaign plan for the development or nation-building role of the AFP. It sought to rectify where "Lambat-Bitag" had failed. Specifically, the plan advocated the lead agency concept, involvement of civic and sectoral organizations and military commanders at all levels, delivery of basic services, AFP economic development projects (livelihood projects), cooperative development, disaster preparedness, use of reservists, AFP modernization (anchored on self-reliance), and environmental protection and preservation.⁷ The Army Concern on Community Organizing for Development, for instance, was in line with the implementation of "Unlad-Bayan."

After attaining peace with the military rebels, Ramos next made peace with the MNLF, led by Nur Misuari, in 1996. Although it appeared as if Ramos was making peace with the enemies of the state one by one, the fact was that governmental peace overtures were offered to various insurgent groups almost simultaneously. Even while meaningful progress had already been achieved with the military rebels and MNLF, there were likewise ongoing peace talks with the CPP/NPA and MILF. In fact, inroads toward achieving a similar peace accord as that sealed with the MNLF were already in the works when the Ramos administration had to put everything on hold as it turned over power to Joseph Estrada, who succeeded Ramos in 1998.

Ramos took advantage of the generally progressive political and economic atmosphere by issuing a change in approach.⁸ He hoped to turn the counterinsurgency over to the Philippine National Police, thus allowing the AFP to focus on modernizing itself in order to become capable of deterring *external* aggression after decades of addressing *internal* rebellion.

While the AFP prepared for its modernization as a traditional organization, it had to continue on the path of traditional and nontraditional undertakings as the need for development in many remote areas continued. Among these projects were the Community Assistance and Rural Empowerment through Social Services program and the Army Literacy Patrol System program of the Philippine army. Through these programs, army units delivered basic services such as medical and education missions to remote communities.⁹

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The Estrada administration declared an all-out war against the MILF in 1999 following the collapse of peace talks. That irresponsible action threw out all the painstaking gains toward achieving lasting political stability made by the two previous administrations. Estrada's ill-advised decision certainly used the AFP's traditional role toward resolving a long insurgency at the expense of its nontraditional contributions. Moreover, while the AFP succeeded in driving the MILF forces away from the territories they occupied, the victory was merely tactical and came at the expense of the strategic opportunity for lasting peace.

By early 2001, Estrada was deposed by the same military organization whose loyalty he had courted by supporting the generals who wanted an all-out war against the MILF forces in 1999. Estrada refused to resign following his impeachment on accusations of corruption.

The AFP under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo continued the strategy of security and

development to win its wars. The updated AFP security and development plan, code-named Operation Plan Bantay-Laya I (2001), complemented security operations with the delivery of basic services needed by communities to win them back from the influence of the CPP/NPA. Among such undertakings were the Kalahi Projects of the Army's 2^d Infantry Division in Southern Luzon and CODE (community development). These projects, generally delivered by army units in their respective areas of responsibility, included livelihood enterprises, technical assistance, provision of equipment and utilities, and simply facilitating coordination with relevant local government units.¹⁰

The continued involvement of the AFP in election duties was hampered by an unfortunate turn of events in 2004 with the eruption of the "Hello Garci" scandal. A wiretap from the Intelligence Service, Armed Forces of the Philippines, smuggled out by one of the unit's agents, revealed allegations of vote-rigging by the incumbent president, Gloria Arroyo, who was running against the populist actor Fernando Poe, Jr. The scandal also alleged substantive involvement by some members and units of the AFP in the vote-rigging, including Hermogenes Esperon, Jr., who eventually became one of Arroyo's many AFP chiefs of staff. In November 2011, Arroyo was prevented from leaving the Philippines and arrested for the vote-rigging incident. The scandal was not the first time the AFP's involvement in election duties was put to question. Like its predecessors, the Arroyo administration continued the proven formula of security and development as its strategy toward the insurgencies. In truth, it will take a great deal of time before the insurgencies can be resolved; they will continue to exist as long as their root causes are

present. The AFP under Arroyo implemented Operation Plan Bantay-Laya II in 2007, which saw the establishment of the AFP National Development Support Command (NDSC). The NDSC is one of the largest units of the AFP and has the authority to work with any unit of the AFP to accomplish its mission. Initially meant to implement national development projects in internal security operations (ISO)-related areas, the NDSC was later authorized by the Arroyo regime (in 2008) to undertake national development projects even in non-ISO-related areas or designated AFP-supported national development priority areas under the purview of the Inter-Agency Transfer Fund, civil works projects, special projects (flagship programs or those designated by the president), civil-military operations, base services and support development, and those programmed by the Bases Conversion and Development Authority.¹¹

The Arroyo AFP has other initiatives all under the umbrella of the security and development strategy. One is the National Internal Security Plan, which tries to accelerate the assumption of responsibility for the developmental programs by the local government units and agencies from the AFP.¹² Another is the mandated support given by all AFP unified commands to integrated disaster risk management, which comes in handy during times of crises.¹³

Separate peace talks with the CPP and MILF initiated by previous governments are continuing under the administration of Benigno Aquino III. Even the employment of peace talks to resolve long-running insurgencies is indicative of the effectiveness of the security and development strategy as peace talks use the language of development to address the unmet needs of the insurgents. Apart from these talks,

Aquino's AFP is implementing Operation Plan Bayanihan, which is a strategy to improve the Philippines' Global Peace Index rating between January 1, 2011, until the end of President Aquino's term in 2016 and to comply with the human rights requirements of international humanitarian law through effective community development programs.

The implementation of the various letters of instruction and operational plans on security and development has led to the AFP's significant contribution of its engineer assets toward directly performing what is usually the responsibility of the Department of Public Works and Highways, amounting to not only millions but also billions of pesos in infrastructure projects throughout the country. As of June 2008, for instance, the AFP Corps of Engineers completed 596 civil works projects amounting to 2.8 billion Philippine pesos (PhP) (est. US\$65.1M).¹⁴ Between July 2008 and December 2009, the Corps of Engineers implemented 501 infrastructure projects worth PhP 439.7 million (est. US\$10.2M) benefiting 367 communities.¹⁵ From January 2009 to January 2011, the AFP NDSC constructed public health centers in 179 communities nationwide amounting to PhP 90.2 million (est. US\$2.1M).¹⁶ Illustrating the types of civil projects implemented by the AFP NDSC, the command constructed 531 school buildings, 366 water systems, 482 farm to market roads, 160 electrification projects, 9 foot bridges, and 18 assorted others (path walks, toilets) nationwide between 2005 and 2009.¹⁷

Current National Security Challenges—Primary

The primary national security challenge confronting the AFP continues to be the threat posed by the CPP/NPA. This insurgency is active nationwide, although its presence is felt

mainly in the remote hinterlands. It espouses an alien ideology that is vastly different from the way of life and values that Filipinos have known throughout their history. It has an underground political organization and army whose presence is felt nationwide and that has used unconventional warfare quite effectively. Although the AFP estimates that CPP influence, strength, and weaponry have dwindled, it is difficult to measure this insurgency based on statistics alone. Many of its elements cannot really be quantified.

Filipinos are predominantly Christian and generally abhor violence or dictatorship

One factor does seem consistent. The insurgency feeds on public discontent with the status quo. The more discontent there is, the more the insurgents fuel it—and the stronger the insurgency becomes. The fact that the insurgency has been around for more than four decades and refuses to go away proves this point. Despite this strength, the insurgency has weaknesses. A profound failing is its espousing a godless ideology through violent dictatorship. Filipinos are predominantly Christian and generally abhor violence or dictatorship. The fact that this insurgency remains just that after more than 40 years illustrates this point. The government continues to dialogue with the CPP in the hope of finding lasting peace. So far, the effort has not been successful, but the government feels it is worth continuing.

Another primary security challenge, next only to the CPP/NPA in severity, is the secessionist threat from the MILF. Beginning in 1975, this insurgency continues because there are enough Filipino Muslims who are unhappy with the way they have been treated by the

predominantly Christian nation and therefore want to live in a territory of their own, namely a portion of Mindanao. The problem with this proposition is that it dismembers the Philippine Republic. Although not as dangerous as it once was, the MILF is still counted by the AFP as a threat due to its not having abandoned its secessionist agenda and the presence of its army. As with the CPP, the Philippine government continues to hold peace talks with the MILF in hopes of finding lasting peaceful coexistence despite significant cultural differences.

There are other armed threats, such as the MILF faction Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement, the Abu Sayyaf Group, and Jemaah Islamiyah. Certainly these groups cannot be discounted, but they are minor threats compared to the CPP and MILF in terms of size, capability, and reach. Despite the Abu Sayyaf Group's notoriety, it is really more a criminal threat using religious extremism as a tool than a serious political organization.

Current National Security Challenges—Secondary

The characteristics common to developing countries also become the national security challenges to so-called soft states. Recurrent issues such as the general lack of resources due to poverty, endemic graft and corruption, incompetence, weak institutions, lack of political will, and oligarchic political and economic control are the security challenges from within. In a way, these issues are arguably the primary rather than the secondary challenges to national security. In most developing countries, these attributes fuel insurgencies. Seldom or never is it the other way around. The same is true with the Philippines.

However, graft and corruption are probably the primary enemies within the AFP in

particular and Philippine society in general. Despite its unique values that highlight honor and sacrifice, the AFP is ultimately only a microcosm of the larger society it remains a part of; it cannot insulate itself from its environment. Its commander in chief is a civilian. Its developmental role demands that the AFP directly engage in civil works and projects and even election duties, which are all prone to corruption. Various media reports have recently highlighted the rampant practice of conversion in the AFP's management of its financial resources and the involvement of senior officers in the practice. *Conversion* is the misappropriation of public funds to make the money appear as if it was spent as intended, when in reality it was used elsewhere. The recorded testimony of former disbursing officer Colonel George Rabusa in congressional hearings provided detailed accounts of the malpractice. Former AFP comptrollers Generals Carlos Garcia and Jacinto Ligo were tried for plunder. Garcia is currently serving his court martial conviction in a national penitentiary, although for a lesser sentence. The public exposure of the malpractice is believed to have led to the suicide of former AFP chief and Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes. These facts are highlighted to show that a significant portion of the threat confronting the AFP is found within itself.

Resource Capacity of National Civilian Institutions

Still a developing economy, the Philippines is often plagued by the perennial lack of resources needed to fund developmental programs and projects implemented by its agencies. It also needs to reform certain elements in its political and economic systems in order to generate more funds needed for

development. A general review of the annual national budget reveals that around 40 percent goes to debt servicing while 25 percent is lost to corruption, leaving only 35 percent for development.¹⁸ Even if not much can be done about reducing the amount of public funds that are used to repay past loans, eliminating or radically reducing the staggering amount lost to corruption would be significant. For instance, the government still needs to find an effective way to increase the tax collection efficiency of significant revenue generating agencies such as the Bureau of Internal Revenue and Bureau of Customs. Conversion must also be controlled. External borrowing is always an option, but further borrowing will only exacerbate the country's already precarious financial posture.

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Capacity Resource of the AFP

AFP resources are part of the 35 percent remaining in the budget after debt servicing and what is lost to corruption. The AFP is completely dependent on whatever is allocated to it by the national government. It is also in need of internal reforms in how it handles resources. Although largely composed of dedicated men and women, the AFP is among the weakest militaries in the region and is still undergoing modernization. In 2004, it embarked on a historical project to rationalize its budgeting process aligned with national security, defense, and military strategies down to tactical plans. Unfortunately, this project does not appear to

have rooted down to the level of coherent and sustained implementation.

To supplement its limited capacity, the AFP gets some external support from allies such as the United States and Australia. For instance, in 2003, under the umbrella provided by the Philippine Defense Reform program consequent to the Joint Defense Assessment with the United States, some support for nontraditional threats was provided to the AFP by the Republic of the Philippines–U.S. Security Engagement Board.¹⁹ During the Republic of the Philippines–U.S. Exercise Balikatan 2002, participating U.S. forces highlighted what appeared to be a newly discovered formula for winning insurgencies, except that it was the same left-hand/right-hand formula known by the AFP since the victory over the Huks in 1954.

Employing the right hand, U.S. forces provided technical intelligence that allowed the AFP to better seek and engage the ASG in Basilan. Using the left-hand approach, U.S. forces combined civil-military operations and engineers to do a detailed assessment of Basilan's demographics. They identified 30 *barangays* that were ASG strongholds, and with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development, they built 80 kilometers of roads, 4 bridges, 2 piers, 25 water projects, 16 schools, and 3 medical clinics; repaired 2 hospitals and an airfield; and conducted Medical Civic Action Programs for 20,000 patients on Basilan Island over a period of 6 months.

Strengthening the argument for the security and development model, U.S. forces found little ideological support—just government inability to provide for the basic needs and security of the people. Furthermore, implementing security and development projects in local areas

restored the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, thereby eroding the base of support for the insurgents.²⁰

Public Expectations of the AFP

Similar to what is expected of the armed forces in any democracy, the Filipino people expect the AFP to fulfill its constitutional role as protector of the people and state. Looking at the history of the AFP, it appears to have performed these roles quite well. Though lacking the sophistication of a professional armed force, the colonial militia was able to defeat the mighty Spanish garrisons and delay the conquest of the even mightier U.S. Army of the Philippines for 2 years—down to the last general, Miguel Malvar, at the turn of the 19th century. During World War II, the Commonwealth Army again outdid itself, gallantly defending the archipelago against the far superior imperial forces of Japan side by side with the Americans down to the last prisoners of war in Capas. The AFP even sent contingents to foreign wars under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) such as the Philippine Expeditionary Force to Korea in the early 1950s and Philippine Civic Action Group to Vietnam in the late 1960s. Today, the AFP continues to send contingents to select UN missions.

As a partner in development, the AFP has been known to help the victims of crises and emergencies. Aside from hurricanes and floods, there are also occasional earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that necessitate intervention by the AFP, such as the Baguio quake in 1990 and the Mount Pinatubo eruption in 1991. The people have also come to expect the AFP to intervene on their behalf during serious political crises, as happened during the EDSA People Power Revolution that ousted Marcos in 1986. The same was true in 2001 when President

Joseph Estrada was impeached for corruption and plunder but refused to step down. In addition to these instances, the AFP has been known to help deliver public goods and services (medical, dental, educational, spiritual) to remote communities.

Risks from AFP Expanded Nontraditional Role

There are a number of risks from the expansion of the AFP nontraditional role. The first is that AFP resources dedicated to development are resources taken away from the AFP's core function of warfighting. Although its developmental role is important, its main task remains winning the nation's wars. There is no other organization in the Philippines that has that role. The country is also still developing and therefore lacks resources, as does the military. Any resources taken away from the AFP's already limited supply further denigrates its capacity to perform its traditional role. Engineer equipment removed to construct civil projects is combat support removed from combat operations. Limited air assets used to support Medical Civic Action Programs or to ferry high-ranking government functionaries to the field are air supports detracted from combat operations—not to mention medical evacuation in case there are casualties. A Civil-Military Operations (CMO) unit diverted to provide basic education to children in remote communities is combat support deducted from the triad of intelligence, combat operations, and CMO as they synergistically interact to attain a tactical or operational objective in a specific theater of operations.

Another risk is the overall impact of the nontraditional role on the core competency of the AFP. General Douglas MacArthur once said

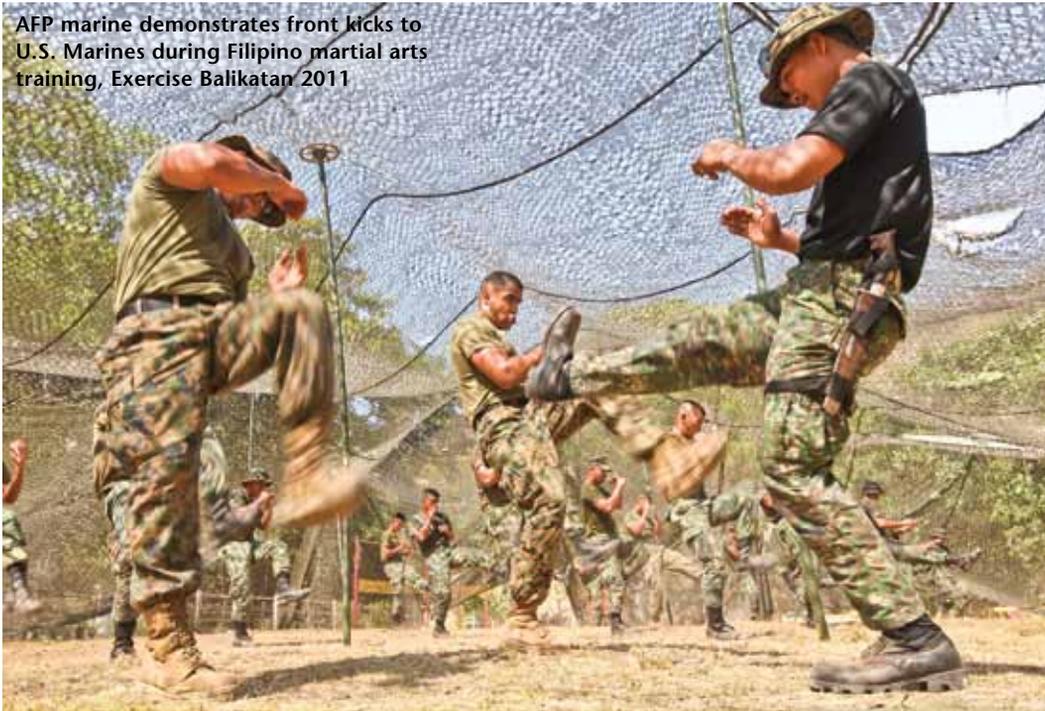
that the main mission of soldiers is to win the nation's wars each time the war tocsin sounds. Although the left-hand/right-hand approach to winning insurgencies is a proven formula, it also has a critical weakness. If left to the AFP to perform both roles, the left-hand role could ultimately weaken the right-hand role. What happens to the unique ability of soldiers to fight and win battles if they end up doing more developmental tasks? Don't "civilian" tasks tend to "soften" soldiers who are fundamentally indoctrinated and trained to kill the enemy? My observation is that the developmental tasks performed by Filipino soldiers over years of exposure in the counterinsurgency campaign appear to have threatened their ability to carry out that unique task. Soldiers of old lament how the AFP seems to have deteriorated in terms of its ability to win wars. Apart from its success over the Huk insurgency in the 1950s, the AFP has not won a single victory over any of its enemies.

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The insurgencies confronting the AFP continue to this day, and instead of dwindling, they are multiplying. Where there were only the CPP/NPA and the MNLF previously, now there are the MILF, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement, Abu Sayyaf Group, and even Jemaah Islamiyah—not to mention the Rajah Solaiman Movement. Meanwhile, the AFP, despite its relative superiority over any of its enemies, continues to suffer basic setbacks such as the recent ambush of a special forces team that claimed the lives of some 25 soldiers, including those who were captured and beheaded by the Abu Sayyaf. These incidents

AFP marine demonstrates front kicks to U.S. Marines during Filipino martial arts training, Exercise Balikatan 2011

U.S. Marine Corps (Anthony Ward, Jr.)



are nothing new in the history of fighting insurgencies. The real question that should be asked is why these incidents continue to occur despite the many lessons learned from the past. Why did the patrol wander into known enemy territory without authorization from higher headquarters, therefore jeopardizing the sending of reinforcements and the usual combat support and combat service support? Without going through the detail of every similar engagement over the years, this loss illustrates much about the state of the AFP's fundamental readiness to fight and win battles, and much more to win wars.

The more the AFP performs the developmental role in areas already cleared of insurgents, the more obvious it is when an accountable civil government fails to have basic developmental programs and institutions rooted in place to prevent the insurgency from returning and jeopardizing painstaking gains. This is the third risk. The lack of delivery in the developmental phase by the permanent stakeholders in many of the cleared localities was what doomed Operation Plan Lambat-bitag in the late 1980s to overall failure. Otherwise, it would have been as successful as were the earlier phases of clearing, holding, and consolidating. Lambat-bitag was the most successful application of the left-hand/right-hand concept since the Huk campaign. Current AFP operational plans and letters of instruction whose names have a tendency to change in every administration are mere variations of the same concept, and none has been as successful as Lambat-bitag.

The most critical risks to the core values of the AFP are graft and corruption, which have grown to become the AFP's enemy within. Direct participation in the actual implementation of

civil works projects has allowed the allure of financial kickbacks to seep into the AFP’s consciousness and internal systems, undermining core values over time.

Members of the AFP, especially officers, get exposed to corruption through their involvement in political activities such as election duties and by going through the Commission on Appointments for confirmation to ranks of colonel and above. Political activities are almost always partisan. Often, soldiers pay for the roles they play in keeping electoral exercises honest, orderly, and peaceful. The peculiarities of culture also add to the complexity. Seldom are there elections in the Philippines where losing candidates do not accuse winning opponents of cheating. Soldiers who help ensure fair play during elections often get caught in the middle and accused of favoring certain candidates. Some people may endorse certain members of the AFP, who they claim offended them or their interests, to politicians who in turn could get to the targeted members through the Commission on Appointments when they go for confirmation to higher ranks in the organization. The mandated procedure of having to be confirmed has politicized the promotion process, allowing undue influence by politicians as well as their intrusion into the merit system already utilized by the AFP Board of Generals. The Commission on Appointments mandate has had the effect of encouraging political patronage.

Mitigating Actions to Address Risks

Although the developmental tasks of the AFP are apparently important to the counterinsurgency, these tasks tend to take away from the primary responsibility of the armed forces, which is to win the nation’s wars. The quicker the timeline for the AFP to relinquish its developmental role to accountable civilian

stakeholders, the sooner the AFP can focus on warfighting. Ultimately, the left-hand tasks rightfully belong to the civilian stakeholders in the communities that are affected by the insurgency, while the right-hand tasks solely belong to the AFP as the coercive power of the state.

Nevertheless, this left-hand/right-hand (or civilian-military) partnership still needs to work efficiently and effectively as a team. Also, the AFP’s exposure to corruption and partisan political activity must be quickly contained before it destroys the organization from within. Finally, the civilian-military partnership between the AFP and civilian stakeholders must be headed by leadership with the political will to resolve each of the national security challenges within the shortest time frames possible similar to the model of President Ramon Magsaysay, which decisively defeated the PKP/Hukbalahap insurgency in 1954.

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Bridging the Gap: The AFP and Civil Government

Corruption appears to be the main gap that must be bridged between the AFP and civil government by both entities, taking the necessary steps either to eradicate or mitigate the practice that is undermining serious efforts to attain security and development. As in most developing countries, the practice of corruption in the Philippines, although illegal, is widespread. Though hidden, it is institutionalized in many parts of the bureaucracy—among them

the Department of Public Works and Highways and even the AFP. Corrupt practices affect the capacity of civilian stakeholders to step up and own development in the communities that have already been cleared of insurgents by the AFP. Initially, the AFP, through its corps of engineers, was relied on to perform dependably where civilian counterparts fell short. However, even the AFP itself became vulnerable to the systemic corruption surrounding construction projects that generate substantial margins for kickbacks. By effectively checking the incidence of corruption affecting the development phase of the counterinsurgency campaign, the much-needed quantum leap into resolving insurgencies through genuine development can be achieved.

Legitimacy, corruption, and human rights are the gaps that continually exist between the AFP and civil society. The huge overall gap in relations between the AFP and civil society was significantly narrowed by the role the former played on the side of people power at EDSA in 1986, which resulted in regime change at the expense of Marcos. However, the honeymoon was brief as relations again soured following the successive coup attempts launched by military adventurists led by Colonel Gregorio Honasan during the administration of Corazon Aquino between 1986 and 1992. Although immensely popular at the start of his mandate, actor-turned-politician Joseph Estrada was nevertheless ousted from office midway through his term in 2001 following impeachment proceedings. Civil society relations with the military once again soared to a new high.

If relations during the time of Aquino did not go well because the plotters went against a popular democracy, civil society again criticized the AFP during the term of Gloria Macapagal

Arroyo for doing the opposite in supporting a widely discredited regime. This latest gap is probably not without firm basis. Along with accusations that the AFP, owing to its role during the martial law period, endured the administration of Arroyo, this era arguably represented a new low in the history of the AFP. It was then that the AFP's legitimacy and record of human rights were put to serious doubt. The allegations were extremely embarrassing and it was believed that they led to Reyes's suicide. Allegations also led to the indictment of several high-ranking officers and helped convict former Generals Carlos Garcia and Jacinto Ligtot.

Then there was the infamous and cold-blooded massacre of political rivals and several journalists in Maguindanao Province by the Ampatuan clan, who ruled as warlords. The AFP in Maguindanao turned a blind eye to the atrocities of the Ampatuans since they were favored political allies of the regime. As political allies of Arroyo, the Ampatuans were more responsible for ensuring her electoral victory not only in Maguindanao but also nationwide by padding votes sufficiently to reflect a wide margin of victory over rival Fernando Poe, Jr., in the 2004 presidential elections. The Arroyo era was indeed a low point in AFP history. From Arroyo's illegitimacy, to massive corruption, to gross human rights violations, the AFP stood down when it had a chance to stand out as it did in 1986 and 2001. Today, therefore, working to restore legitimacy, decisively addressing graft and corruption, and dramatically improving its human rights record are must-win battles for the AFP.

Conclusion

The AFP's experience from decades of countering various insurgencies that it

continues to face has had both positive and negative consequences for the armed forces as an institution as well as for state-building in the Philippines. The security and development (left-hand/right-hand) approach toward winning insurgencies is a time-tested and proven formula. It defeated the first communist insurgency waged by the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas and its military arm, the Hukbalahap. Through Operation Plan Lambat-Bitag, it could have won again in the late 1980s had it not been for the lack of developmental follow-through from civilian stakeholders. That the AFP and the Philippine state continue their counterinsurgency strategy along this line is already a giant step in the right direction.

Apart from the tendency to assess the success or failure of the counterinsurgency experience of the Philippines based solely on the final outcome of decisive victory, there are other ways of evaluating the experience, such as noting the positive and negative developments that have occurred from decades of trying to put an end to various rebellions. The positive experience can be attributed to the AFP's contribution of its military values to its external environment, while much of the negative experience is accounted for by its expanded exposure to politics, which have undermined its core values. The situation for the AFP and state is not entirely hopeless as there are ways and means to bridge the identified gaps to enhance civil-military capacity to accomplish the mission relative to the various stakeholders who are its customers and partners. The ultimate solution is good political leadership, which is always a key element or prerequisite anywhere serious challenges arise. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The approximate size of the Philippine army is from Captain Mark Posadas of the Office of the Chief of Staff, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

² The estimated strength of the Philippine air force is from Colonel Rolando Acop, currently the Defense and Armed Forces Attaché of the Philippines to India.

³ Alfredo S. Oliveros, *The Development Role of the Armed Forces of the Philippines: A Policy Option Paper* (Quezon City, Philippines: National Defense College of the Philippines, 1998), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46–48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–16.

¹⁰ Romeo L. Labrador, *An Evaluation of the Community Development Team Approach as a Strategy for the Enhancement of Internal Security Operations* (Quezon City, Philippines: National Defense College of the Philippines, 2006), 105–106.

¹¹ Ferozaldo Paul T. Regencia, *National Development Priority Area Projects: Prospects for Integration* (Quezon City, Philippines: AFP Command and General Staff College, 2008), 60–71.

¹² Ferdinand M. Friginal, *Appropriateness of the AFP in the Suppression of Insurgency* (Quezon City, Philippines: AFP Command and General Staff College, 2008), 121–124.

¹³ Erwin A. Alea, *An Integrated Disaster Response Approach for the AFP Unified Commands* (Quezon City, Philippines: AFP Command and General Staff College, 2008), 121–123.

¹⁴ Manuel S. Ramiro, *The Role of AFP Corps of Engineers in National Development: An Assessment* (Quezon City, Philippines: National Defense College of the Philippines, 2008), 135–142.

¹⁵ Wilfredo A. Visperas, *The Impact of Infrastructure Projects of the Naval Construction Brigade to Community Development* (Quezon City, Philippines: AFP Command and General Staff College, 2011), 49.

¹⁶ The data is from the Kalayaan Barangays Program Accomplishment Report as of May 12, 2011, submitted to the AFP National Development Support Command.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The research data is from a presentation, “National Situationer: Focus on Social and Economic Development,” delivered by former Philippine treasurer Professor Leonor M. Briones before the East Canlubang Industrial Park Association, Laguna, Philippines, on August 20, 2010.

¹⁹ Elmer R. Amon, *The Non-Traditional Security Concerns Under the RP–US Security Engagement Board and Their Implications to the Capability of the AFP* (Quezon City, Philippines: National Defense College of the Philippines, 2008), 109–118.

²⁰ Kevin Lasater, *Applying Lessons Learned: The Role of CMO in Counterinsurgency in Basilan* (Quezon City, Philippines: AFP Command and General Staff College, 2010), 26–28.