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DISCUSSION PAPER

A SCENARIO FOR U.S. INTERVENTION
IN THE PHILIPPINES

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HI-2795-DP

March 1978

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New York 10520

U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines in the late 1970s appeared rather calm. The Marcos dictatorship, initiated in 1972, repressed student unrest, captured much of the leadership of the communist New People's Army in the northern Philippines, jailed the key opposition leaders such as Benigno Aquino without great public protest, and destroyed the great fortunes of the Filipino "oligarchs" who might have challenged the rule of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. Much of the potential opposition was coopted, including liberal land reformers, labor leaders, and even dissidents such as former communist guerilla leader Luis Taruc. Repression was successful even though it was less oppressive than in many other countries.

But if Marcos maintained his rule, he was considerably less successful at achieving popular enthusiasm and economic dynamism a la Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore, a favorite Marcos role model. The economy improved only marginally. A land reform with great initial momentum petered out quickly. Resentment of the lack of democracy went deeper than in neighboring countries. And the consensus persisted that the central goal of the Marcos family was not the enrichment of the Philippines but the enrichment of the Marcoses. An attempt in 1972-'73 to collect all privately owned weapons was generally successful in Christian areas, but triggered long-standing conflicts with Muslims into a major uprising. Nonetheless, the regime seemed to be able to maintain its equilibrium.

In international affairs, the fall of South Vietnam brought an extensive reappraisal of Philippine foreign policies. Relations with communist nations were initiated and upgraded. The U.S. bases came to be

viewed more as a source of revenue than as a symbol of alliance. But tensions with the U.S. over human rights and over payments for the bases seemed manageable.

All in all, the situation in the Philippines had moved from the 70s to the 80s in rather easy fashion. If matters had been left to strictly internal factors, some analysts have indicated that it was possible that the Presidency under Marcos would have been able to move toward greater democracy and perhaps acceptability in Western terms. Certainly the facade was there, but several different factors came into play that made impossible such development.

Economically the Philippines began to seriously suffer from a world-wide drop in sugar prices. As the principal export and foreign exchange earnings crop of the nation, this placed a considerable economic burden on the Marcos regime, a burden that was felt down to the local level. The economic downturn created and maintained a dissidence on the village level that Marcos had not had to seriously contend with in earlier years. The provincial governors, who were the real powers in the hinterlands, continued their semi-feudal manners of governing and personal aggrandizement--a factor which only further separated them from their own people. Reactions among the young, especially the student population in the major universities, grew more strident. Strikes in support of disadvantaged agricultural workers became the fashion among university students and the Manila police were called in on several occasions to put down serious riots in which scores of young people were injured and killed. But this too could have been contained if external factors had not been working against the control elements within the Philippine administration.

The Soviet Union for some years had been chafing under its inability to make substantial inroads in the Southeast Asia scene, other than that which it had been able to maintain with the Hanoi government of Vietnam. The Philippines posed an interesting and valuable target of opportunity. Not only was it conceived useful to Moscow that a more pro-Soviet government would hold power in Manila for regional purposes, but the Soviet strategic ambitions in the Middle East and Indian Ocean would be immeasurably aided by the closing down of the U.S. bases at Clark Field, and most particularly the naval base at Subic Bay. The Subic Bay naval facility was for the Americans the principal home port of the U.S. fleet operations serving South and Southeast Asia. The removal of the U.S. base at Subic Bay would force the Americans to rely on principal bases at Yokosuka, Guam, and Pearl Harbor, an extraordinary distance from the Indian Ocean--an important extension of the U.S.S.R.'s Middle East and Horn of Africa interests and a growing target of the Soviet Navy. Soviet overtures began with an offer in early 1978 to build a nuclear power plant, criticized by the U.S. for poor location and for the corruption involved in the contract.

Relations between the Muslim dissident groups of the southern islands of the Philippines and the Libyans had been quite extensive prior to the arrangements of 1976. In the years previous to '76 financial and material aid had been substantially provided by Tripoli to the Marco rebels. But during that year Colonel Quaddafi had begun to work closely with President Marcos and his wife, Imelda, in order to evolve a peaceful solution to the several-century-old dissidence of the Moro tribesmen of the Philippines. However, peaceful intervention had broken down and the Libyans, once

again, in 1978 stepped away from further requests to intervene. Fighting in the Moro areas had reached varying heights of significance during the years following. Periods of greater Central Government control of the area had occurred only to be broken by renewed hostilities. The Moros had perpetuated their fight for autonomy since the earliest days of Spanish colonization and the later American occupation, and had no intention of ceasing their traditional struggle. For the Soviets this provided an opportunity, if somewhat belated in recognition, for the development of their own entry into the Philippine scene. Through the Libyan connection and other radical Arab Muslim groups with whom they maintained extensive covert political-military contacts, the Soviets resupplied the Moro rebels to a level of sophisticated weaponry that had become typical of Soviet intervention in the several so-called wars of independence ranging from the Western Sahara through the Middle East; anti-tank weapons, ground-to-air missiles, and other more sophisticated devices became available to the Moro tribesmen. The Philippine Army, the Philippine Constabulary, and the other elements of the armed forces found their task increasingly difficult as they attempted to maintain control in predominantly Muslim areas of the Philippines. Again the drain on the national economy was considerable and added also to the financial difficulties in which the Marcos administration found itself.

President Marcos had earlier made clear his desire for a "warm and continuing friendship" with the People's Republic of China. He saw it to his nation's advantage to develop an amity with this important power of Asia. His policy was quite consistent with American ambitions for they,

by the early eighties, had also extended full diplomatic recognition to the PRC. The encouragement of increased trade with Communist China had occurred throughout the region of the Pacific Basin. This had placed the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in an extremely difficult tactical position. The CPP had continued on a local basis throughout the country, though mostly in the region of Central Luzon, with varying degrees of success, a program of political/military contest with local Philippine military forces. The CPP (with its military wing, the New People's Army [NPA]), had shown an extraordinary ability to continue to exist. In spite of repeated arrests of its leadership, the CPP/NPA had built an infrastructure of continuity that had been impossible to root out. Having broken with the Soviet-sponsored former Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), and having moved to the Maoist form, the CPP now found itself in the embarrassing position of having President Marcos' government in closer relations with Peking than itself. In turn, the Chinese government diminished considerably its own political and limited covert military supplies to the CPP/NPA. Into this vacuum the Soviets moved with alacrity. The feeling of insecurity created within the CPP by the improving relations between Marcos and the People's Republic of China was well exploited by Soviet contacts through foreign intermediaries in Southeast Asia. Soon, as in the case of the Moros, supplies and insurgency capability were being built up through Soviet-sponsored sources. The NPA expanded its already existing limited activities in northern and eastern Mindanao and improved its liaison with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The Philippine security forces were now taxed to control the outbreaks of hostilities in the North, in the area of

Luzon, at the same time as their involvement grew in the southern regions as a result of the conspicuous increase of Moro rebel operations.

The unique ability of President Marcos to maintain his authority over the country had been based as much on the perception of strength in control of the military and provincial leaders as it was on the actual control itself. With the economic downturn, the increase in urban and student violence, the growing dissidence within the villages, and the stepped up military problems spreading the breadth of the country, this perception of Marcos' control was clearly diminishing. The competition among the generals, which had been a simple fact of life even in better times, grew far more dangerous during these difficult times. Military leaders, such as Rear Admiral Romulo Espaldon who had commanded the southern region, and himself came from this region, grew to resent the influence of Army general officers who were incompetent, and owed their position solely to family or other personal ties to Ferdinand Marcos. The Philippine Constabulary (PC), which had previously followed the lead of the Philippine Armed Forces, but which was closely allied to the provincial governments to which it was specifically assigned, provided also another serious area of discontent. The provincial governors, themselves, long existing by way of the financial and political advantages which were forthcoming from Manila, became unsure of what their own future might bring in a Marcos administration which was now under serious political attack. More and more the Central Government found that its ability to govern through the historically established channels of provincial leadership was severely curtailed. General unrest from economic and political downturns grew in the provinces. The Marcos government now found itself dangerously

weakened right at its previous strong point--control of provincial leadership. However, it was the university students in Manila who set the match to what had become a political tinderbox over the past several years. Confused fighting between and among Constabulary Forces and Armed Forces in certain provinces, outbreaks of regional disturbances, combined with unexpectedly well-coordinated attacks by the Moros and an increasingly effective CPP/NPA paramilitary capability threw the nation into a state of general insurrection and relative chaos. Provincial leaders commanding allegiance of the officers of certain regionally assigned units and varying elements of the AFP general staff vied for control of the military forces of the nation.

The sprawling shanty town of Olongapo, outside of Subic Bay Naval Base, always politically dangerous, erupted into general violence with the assistance of CPP cadres. The winding, hilly road leading to Olongapo and Subic from Manila, regularly washed out in the rainy season, made it impossible for loyal government forces to reinforce units in the area. A similar situation occurred in the city of Angeles, which formerly was under strict provincial government control. American personnel and dependents at Subic and Clark Field had to be evacuated. Fighting erupted between the Philippine insurrection units and U.S. Armed Forces guarding Subic. The U.S. was forced to make a decision to employ additional forces for the protection of the U.S. facilities and personnel in the area. At the same time President Ferdinand Marcos sought to encourage Washington to utilize the excuse of the danger which existed to the American personnel as a justification for direct military assistance to him to maintain his government in the Philippines. A provisional rebel

government calling for Moro autonomy and establishment of a socialist state was formed through a "united front" of Muslim, communist, and dissident provincial leadership. They requested direct assistance of the Soviet Navy to blockade the principal ports in order to prevent "imminent American attack in aid of Marcos." The Soviet Navy steamed toward the Philippines as Washington debated the inherent dangers to American strategic concerns.

EAST ASIAN REGIONS

