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THE PHILIPPINES AND ASEAN

Options for Aquino

_____ Donald E. Weatherbee

Since February 1986 the world has closely watched President Corazon Aquino's Philippines. Quite naturally most of the attention has been focused on the domestic struggle to institutionalize "people power" both administratively and in the process of creating a new constitution. Observations on the foreign policy implications of the regime change have generally dealt with discussions of the future of the U.S. military base rights in the Philippines. While the U.S.-Philippines security relationship is important—some would even say vital—there is another set of interdependencies that deserves attention, the Philippines as one of the six state actors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Manila is slated to be the site of ASEAN's third summit meeting, now scheduled for December 1987. An examination of the Aquino government's international behavior in the ASEAN regional framework gives some insight into both continuities and discontinuities in Philippines foreign policy under Aquino, as well as illustrates some of the broader issues of the dynamics of regionalism in Southeast Asia.

The Marcos Government in ASEAN

In 1967, with the Bangkok Declaration, Philippines Foreign Secretary Narciso Ramos in association with the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand called into existence an organization designed to provide the basis for regional economic, social, cultural, administrative, and technical cooperation. In 1976 at the first or Bali Summit, the Declaration of ASEAN Concord and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia provided an explicit political blueprint for harmonizing the ASEAN nations' foreign policies. Through nineteen

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years, the Marcos government consistently promoted the ASEAN goals and Manila's symbolic support for the organization was impressive.

In one sense, Philippines membership in ASEAN was a natural consequence of its previous engagement in earlier efforts in regionalism: Maphilindo and the Association of Southeast Asia. The interests that the Philippines and the other members sought to pursue through ASEAN were both those couched in the generalities of the founding document and those of more narrowly defined national self-interest. ASEAN gave the Philippines a stage on which to play as an independent, sovereign Asian nation, not a trans-Pacific appendage of the United States. It was a vehicle for the assertion of a regional identity. Secondly, although it is often forgotten as we view the wreckage of the economy today, in 1967 the Philippines seemed to be on the brink of becoming a Southeast Asian NIC. Manila economists and entrepreneurs saw in ASEAN an opportunity to penetrate new markets and reduce their dependency on the traditional patterns of Philippines trade.

In terms of the workings of the organization, Manila has been generally politically passive, particularly with respect to the Indochina crisis that has preoccupied ASEAN since December 1978. Manila has gone along with the ASEAN consensus, apparently not having tried to shape that consensus or to create diplomatic and political initiatives of its own. In part, this may be because of its sense of relative political and strategic remoteness from the conflict, both geographically and in light of its American security linkages. Also, the Kampuchean crisis coincided with economic downturn in the Philippines and the rise of political opposition to Marcos. Increasingly preoccupied with internal affairs in the 1980s, the Marcos government had little political contribution to make to ASEAN. Foreign Minister Tolentino confessed to this at the 17th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 1984. "While our national effort must now be concentrated in resolving critical domestic economic issues," he said, "we find it equally self-evident that any progress on our domestic front must be achieved in the context of continued interaction and cooperation with our ASEAN neighbours."¹

On the other hand, the Philippines has been one of the most active promoters of regional cooperative arrangements and structures in the functional areas as laid out in the original Bangkok Declaration. An organizationally strong and regionally integrating ASEAN was set as a

1. *Straits Times*, 11 July 1984.

goal by President Marcos as early as 1968.² This led at times to a Manila-Singapore axis in ASEAN as both countries sought to move toward freer intra-ASEAN trade. Manila has consistently been supportive of moving ASEAN in genuinely integrative directions, sometimes—to Indonesian annoyance—acting as the organizational gadfly. Marcos was the first to call for a third ASEAN summit in his address opening the 13th ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting in May 1982, saying that a summit would provide “fresh impetus” for greater cooperation.³ At the February 1984 gathering of the ASEAN heads of government for the official celebration of Brunei’s independence, Marcos lobbied his counterparts for a Manila summit. By this time, however, his efforts were seen as less directed at strengthening ASEAN than burnishing his own political image, and ASEAN was not prepared to go along.

The real payoffs of ASEAN membership to Marcos’s government, while growing out of the dynamic of regionalism, had little to do with functional cooperation. Malaysian and Indonesian political commitment to ASEAN in the sense of promoting regional security and harmony served to mediate potential conflicts between the Philippines and its neighbours. The dispute over Sabah, while serving to obstruct Malaysia-Philippines cooperation within ASEAN, nevertheless was managed so as to avoid disrupting ASEAN. Further, both Indonesia and Malaysia buffered the Philippines in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and tempered OIC decisions concerning interventions in support of the Moro insurgency. They also were able to control the political sympathies of their own Muslim majorities with respect to the war in the southern Philippines. These issues have been inherited by President Aquino.

Finally, for the ASEAN region, Manila’s real importance had little to do with its organizational contributions. The U.S. security umbrella over the region was founded on the bilateral tie with the Philippines; moreover, the credibility of that commitment was validated by the military posture permitted by the forward basing of U.S. forces in the Philippines. The U.S. in the Philippines became for ASEAN a vital component of the regional balance of power, particularly in light of the Vietnamese-Soviet alliance and the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea.⁴ The issue of the bases

2. Chin Kin Wah, *The ASEAN Secretariat: Prospects for Reform*, paper presented to a “Workshop on Factors Affecting Regional Integration,” ASEAN Economic Research Unit, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore (17–18 December 1981), p. 1.

3. *Straits Times*, 21 May 1982.

4. While ASEAN officials are loathe to go on record with respect to the bases, the consistent and region-wide privately communicated view is that in the absence of a functioning “Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality” (ZOPFAN), a termination of the U.S. base agreements would be inherently destabilizing without major alterations in the policies of the USSR

has become an important part of the Aquino government's informal dialogue with its ASEAN partners.

ASEAN and the "People Power" Revolt

In foreign policy as in domestic policy ASEAN elites have a strong predilection for the status quo. The ASEAN leaderships are essentially conservative with respect to the modalities of change. A key word in their political lexicon is "stability." Therefore, it is not surprising that ASEAN leaderships generally did not react negatively to Marcos's efforts to control events after the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino.⁵ The other governments of the region share in many respects a number of those characteristics of the Marcos regime that proponents of liberal democracy find offensive. It was the inconsistency and ineffectiveness of Marcos's repressive measures that puzzled ASEAN observers who did not differentiate between the Filipino political culture and their own. Moreover, the popular "extra-legal" challenge to Marcos, their long-time ASEAN colleague, had implications for the other countries in terms of possible demonstration or spillover effects.

The prolongation of the crisis up through Marcos's call for a snap presidential election dismayed the other ASEAN members. It became obvious that the polarization of politics in the Philippines reflected political, economic, and social cleavages that could not be bridged by adaptive concessions or even greater measures of forceful repression. The ASEAN governments were forced to consider possible scenarios with potentially disruptive impacts on ASEAN itself. Direct American intervention, for example, would lead to ambivalent responses in the ASEAN publics. Some members of the ASEAN elite would have welcomed Philippine military intervention, but this too was viewed as only sharpening the differences and sure to lead to a civil war. The growing popularity and strength of the radical left and the New Peoples Army (NPA) as the Filipino center was assaulted by the Marcos regime shocked ASEAN's anticommunists. The possibility of the eventual emergence of a truly radical successor regime, which would have dramatic consequences for ASEAN and the implicit American security guarantee, could not be ruled out. Given these possible alternatives, once it became clear that Marcos could not salvage the situation without plunging the country into civil chaos, the ASEAN elites realistically accepted the fact that peaceful succession with all its

and the PRC. The code words for ASEAN support of continuation of the base agreements are an "active U.S. presence."

5. Statements about ASEAN attitudes toward the political struggle in the Philippines are based on the author's discussions in the region in 1985 and 1986.

policy unknowns was preferable to a Marcos attempt to retain power at all costs.

The deteriorating situation in the Philippines after the February 7, 1986, elections, and particularly the increasing violence, set alarms ringing throughout the ASEAN region. As an official in Singapore said, there had been strong hopes that the vote would create stability, but "now we have the worst of both worlds."⁶ The *Jakarta Post*, which often reflects Indonesian Foreign Ministry views, said there was worry that "ASEAN's cohesion and Indonesia's internal stability will be affected by the worsening crisis."⁷ These and similar expressions from Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok were officially aggregated by the ASEAN foreign ministers who, on February 23, issued a joint statement on the situation in the Philippines that was released simultaneously in the respective capitals.

As member states of ASEAN, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have followed with increasing concern the turn of events following the presidential election in the Philippines.

A critical situation has emerged which portends bloodshed and civil war.

The crisis can be resolved without widespread carnage and political turmoil. We call on all parties to restore national unity and solidarity so as to maintain national resilience.

There is still time to act with restraint and bring about a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

We hope that all Filipino leaders will join efforts to pave the way for a peaceful solution to the crisis.⁸

Even though the foreign ministers refrained from calling upon Marcos to step down, the fact that ASEAN formally and publicly addressed the issue demonstrated their appreciation of the gravity of the moment. This was a significant and unprecedented departure from the established norms of intra-ASEAN behavior, which call for nonintervention in the affairs of member states. The ASEAN communique was officially and unofficially elaborated. A Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman said: "The situation in the Philippines reflects the fact that politics in the ASEAN countries is not like 15 to 20 years ago, when one man can dictate."⁹ Regional newspaper comment was less restrained. For example, the *Straits Times* editorialized: "The political crisis in the Philippines has worsened to such an extent in

6. *Straits Times*, 25 February 1986.

7. *Jakarta Post*, 24 February 1986.

8. Text as given in the *Straits Times*, 26 February 1986. It differs slightly from the English translation of the Thai text as reproduced in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: Asia and Pacific* (hereafter FBIS, *DR/APA*), 25 February 1986, p. A-1.

9. *New York Times*, 26 February 1986.

the past few days that violence and bloodshed can now be avoided only if Mr. Marcos steps down from the presidency he so questionably claimed after the last election."¹⁰

It was, therefore, with no small sense of relief that the ASEAN capitals learned of and welcomed the departure of Marcos for Honolulu. This was evident in their quick and warmly-worded official congratulatory messages to the Aquino government. It has been suggested that the sending of "congratulations" by the ASEAN states at this point, in contrast to the "recognition" accorded by the United States and Japan, implied an ASEAN preference to see Mrs. Aquino's succession as a result of constitutional takeover rather than revolutionary change.¹¹ Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaiddin said in a statement that Malaysia was gratified and relieved over the development and "congratulates the Filipino people in their hour of triumph and fulfillment after such a determined and courageous struggle."¹² Thailand's Prime Minister Prem, speaking on behalf of the Thai government and people, said: "We respect and admire the Philippine people for their struggle which resulted in a peaceful change of government."¹³ While not disclosing the actual contents of President Suharto's congratulatory message to Mrs. Aquino, Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar admitted that the political outcome in Manila had afforded ASEAN "relative relief."¹⁴

While the other ASEAN countries welcomed the peaceful transition in Manila, the leader of the new government was an unknown quantity in the various capitals. Although familiar faces were seen in the government, Enrile being most prominent, the people closest to Mrs. Aquino had not previously been part of ASEAN's elite circles. What kind of commitment would the Aquino government make to ASEAN? What would be her stand with respect to national and regional "resilience" defined as internal security? How would she deal with the Sabah question, ASEAN's perennial irritant? Finally, and in some capitals most importantly, would the Philippines continue to contribute to the regional balance of power through its security relationship with the United States?

10. *Straits Times*, 26 February 1986.

11. Hans Indorf, "People power: fallout on Asean neighbors," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (hereafter *FEER*), 27 March 1986, p. 33.

12. BERNAMA (Kuala Lumpur), 26 February 1986, in FBIS, *DR/APA*, 27 February 1986, p. O-1.

13. "Voice of Free Asia," 26 February 1986, in *ibid.*, 28 February 1986, p. J-1.

14. FBIS, *DR/APA*, 26 February 1986, p. N-1.

The Aquino Government and Commitment to ASEAN

During the presidential campaign Mrs. Aquino had pledged a special effort to revitalize Philippine relations with ASEAN neighbors. She reiterated the intention when, only two days after the "people power" revolt had installed her in office, she met with ambassadors of the ASEAN countries and promised that her government would "work closely" with the other member states. In a sense, the new government was officially welcomed to the ASEAN ranks when Vice-President and concurrently Foreign Minister Salvador H. Laurel joined the other ASEAN foreign ministers in Bali at the end of April to meet with President Reagan. The major focus for Philippine officials at that time was not ASEAN, however, for this was the occasion for the first meeting between the new government and the most senior U.S. officials.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was the first ASEAN leader to meet Mrs. Aquino face-to-face in her new role during an official visit to Manila at the end of June 1986. High on the agenda for the talks, after preliminary and somewhat effusive expressions of mutual esteem, was agreement on the importance of the proposed ASEAN summit in the Philippines, both intrinsically in terms of the economic issues to be addressed and as a symbolic expression of ASEAN support for the Aquino government. The summit had been agreed upon by the end of 1985, and planning for it was already underway at the January 1986 ASEAN senior officials meeting in Chiangmai. The accession of Mrs. Aquino, however, gave the planned summit a new political quality. In August, President Aquino underlined the primary ASEAN identity of the Philippines by choosing to make her first official trip abroad to ASEAN countries—Indonesia and Singapore. It had first been thought that she would travel to Washington, but she was persuaded that to visit in the region first would affirm her intention to revitalize the Philippines' ASEAN role.

President Aquino's first opportunity to reaffirm the Philippines' commitment to ASEAN in a formal structural setting came at the 19th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Manila on June 23, 1986. Her welcoming speech was remarkable in that, rather than relying on the self-congratulatory platitudes that so often have marked the public presentations of high level intra-ASEAN dialogue, Mrs. Aquino sternly recited the litany of ASEAN's failed expectations and aspirations. Looking forward to the planned 1987 summit, she enjoined the foreign ministers to consider how far short of its goals of economic cooperation and progress ASEAN had fallen and to turn to a reexamination of the kinds of problems that threatened to render continued association meaningless. "After 19 years

of existence," she said, "ASEAN should already be evaluating the impact of regional economic cooperation instead of endlessly discussing how to get it off the ground."¹⁵

Although President Aquino's candidly critical remarks reflected frustration at the slow pace of progress shared by many in ASEAN's various public and private constituencies, the way in which she voiced them did not sit too well with senior ASEAN officials. As a newcomer to the ranks of ASEAN's elite, it was felt that her "blasting" of ASEAN was inappropriate and ill-timed.¹⁶ Two months later, on August 28, she opened the 18th ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting in Manila. While her message was essentially unchanged, it was delivered in a more measured and moderate fashion. Mrs. Aquino said that although the ASEAN economies have tended to go their own separate ways in pursuit of self-interest and almost all steps that were essential to the attainment of ASEAN's objectives have failed, yet peace and stability reigned in the region. Thus, despite her admitted earlier impatience expressed at the June foreign ministers meeting, she could now say that ASEAN would endure regardless of the speed of cooperation. The lesson she had learned in the course of her visits to Indonesia and Singapore, she said, was that the real essence of the association was in the region's peace and stability and the friendship among the six members.

President Aquino's generalized call for more progress in ASEAN's economic domain was translated into a program of action that builds upon the long-established Philippine approach to ASEAN as well as the Aquino government's hope that greater economic interaction within ASEAN will benefit the Philippines' faltering domestic economy. This vision, first officially unveiled during the Jakarta visit, is that of a duty-free ASEAN common market by the year 2000. The idea is vigorously pushed by Jose Concepcion, Mrs. Aquino's exuberant and energetic Minister of Trade and Industry. The proposal was expected to take center stage at the August 1986 economic ministers' meeting. As chairman of the meeting, Concepcion drove the discussions into contentious areas that, while not reflected in the harmony of the final communique, meant that in private the ministers were forced to come to grips with functional trade policy areas critical to substantive intra-ASEAN trade liberalization. The galvanizing princi-

15. The text of Aquino's speech, "Time is well past for talking," is in *The Diplomatic Post* (Manila), July-September 1986, pp. 8-9.

16. The *Bangkok Post*, 24 June 1986, headlined its story on the Aquino speech, "Aquino blasts ASEAN as meeting opens." It mentioned that she received "a standing ovation" when she was introduced and "polite applause" after she finished speaking. The author's own interviews with ASEAN bureaucrats confirm the generally negative reaction to her comments.

ple was watered down in the final communique to a noncommittal one-liner: "The concept of intra-ASEAN free trade was also discussed and will be further studied." Concepcion renewed the Philippines-Singapore ASEAN economic policy alliance. In his speech welcoming his ministerial colleagues, he declared support for Singapore's proposal of the so-called "stand-still and roll-back" approach to nontariff barriers inhibiting intra-ASEAN trade.¹⁷

Certainly the openness and new willingness to discuss sensitive issues in ASEAN cooperation demonstrated at the economic ministers' meeting was in part because of the host government's impatience with the old ASEAN ways. This coincided with the sense of urgency felt throughout ASEAN officialdom in preparation for the ASEAN summit. Nevertheless, the Philippines' enthusiasm for faster and more integrative economic progress will probably not be easily translated into consensus, let alone six national policies. The high visibility of the Philippines in the 1986 economic forum, coincidental with the government change in Manila, was an accident of the ASEAN conference rotation system. The consensual structure of decision making in ASEAN continues to inhibit innovation. The accusing finger is usually pointed at Indonesia as being the most obstructive.¹⁸ The Aquino government will be little better able than its predecessor to move ASEAN in the direction of free trade, as indicated in the February 1987 agreement between President Suharto and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that neither a common market nor an ASEAN free trade area should be considered at the ASEAN summit.¹⁹

As for ASEAN's function as a political/diplomatic caucus confronting Vietnam over Kampuchea, Mrs. Aquino's government to date has followed the line of its predecessor in going along with the ASEAN consensus. Moreover, again like its predecessor, the Aquino government wants to keep its bilateral line with Hanoi open as well as renewing the Philippines' opening to China.

The Sabah Issue

Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir, in offering his warmest congratulations to President Aquino, gracefully and tactfully alluded to the ongoing bilateral dispute over sovereignty in Sabah. He said: "It is our hope that Malaysia and the Philippines will be able to gather fresh impetus to ex-

17. *Straits Times*, 29 August 1986.

18. Jose Galang, "Beneficial for whom: Jakarta, Asean's biggest market, opposes a customs union," *FEER*, 18 September 1986, p. 68; "S-E Asian common market stays a dream," *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 23 October 1986.

19. "Stressing solidarity," *FEER*, 19 February 1987, p. 41.

amine various aspects of our relationship in the interest of even deeper friendship between us.”²⁰ For a quarter of a century, since initially advanced by the Macapagal government in 1962, the Philippine claim to sovereignty over Malaysia’s North Borneo Sabah state has not only irritated bilateral relations between the two nations but has impeded ASEAN cooperative activities. Although the claim has not been actively pursued in recent years, its continued existence blocks normal exchanges between the two states. This has been represented symbolically by the unwillingness of a Malaysian prime minister to pay an official visit to the Philippines. Since by ASEAN protocol Manila would be the next site for an ASEAN summit, the possible nonparticipation of the Malaysian prime minister is one of the reasons why no such meeting had been scheduled since the 1977 Kuala Lumpur summit.

There had been hopes for a breakthrough at the 1977 summit when President Marcos verbally renounced the claim, but this was never followed up by constitutional amendment or statutory enactment to provide legal effect under Philippines law. The Philippines national territory continued to be constitutionally defined in terms of “historic right” as well as legal title and has judicially been understood to include Sabah. The Philippine Base Line Act of 1968 (Republic Act. No. 5446) is still in force, and states specifically (Section 2) that the Republic of the Philippines has acquired “dominion and sovereignty” over Sabah. According to Malaysia, nothing will persuade it that the Philippines has in fact dropped the claim but the amending of that act to exclude reference to Sabah.²¹

Malaysia hoped that the change in government in Manila would provide an opportunity for putting the issue to rest once and for all. This seemed to be promised in April 1986 by Vice-President and Foreign Minister Laurel in his first major foreign policy statement. Referring to the Philippine claim to Sabah, he said:

For too long has this dispute been allowed to fester and adversely affect the relations between the Philippines and Malaysia. We are therefore prepared to undertake new negotiations as soon as possible in order to resolve the dispute. Our objective is to establish and maintain friendly and neighborly relations between our two countries on the basis of good faith and mutual respect, and in the interests of truth and justice for all parties concerned. In the process, ASEAN would also be greatly strengthened. The final resolution of the Sabah question would signal the beginning of a new era in the relations between the

20. “Malaysia’s good wishes for the new Philippines government,” *Malaysian Digest*, January-March 1986, p. 1.

21. “No definite steps by Philippines to drop Sabah claim,” *Malaysian Digest*, 30 September 1984, p. 8.

two countries concerned, while reinforcing the growth of closer ties and cooperation among all ASEAN members.²²

This statement was welcomed by Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Rithauddin who said that Malaysia was prepared to give full cooperation to the Philippines to help that country resolve its claim. Prime Minister Mahathir, meeting with Laurel in May 1986, emphasized that settling the claim would not only improve bilateral relations but would also be in line with ASEAN objectives.

Despite Manila's acknowledgement that a resolution of the Sabah claim is a necessary condition for closer Malaysian relations, the rhetoric of reconciliation has not yet been accompanied by substantive acts of renunciation. For example, the framers of the 1986 draft constitution, adopted overwhelmingly in the January 1987 plebiscite, consciously did not terminate the claim in the article on "National Territory."²³ Although there is no specific reference to Sabah, the provision saying Philippine lands include "all other territories over which the Philippines has sovereignty or jurisdiction" would include Sabah, according to one member of the drafting commission.²⁴

Furthermore, Laurel's purported readiness to open new negotiations raises for Malaysia the question of what there is to negotiate. In an interview with the *Sabah Times*, Mrs. Aquino is quoted as saying that her government would engage in "sincere and forthright dealings" with Kuala Lumpur in seeking a solution based on the principles of self-determination and justice.²⁵ This is not satisfactory to Malaysians who feel that both self-determination and justice are already served in the framework of the Malaysian Federation. Certainly little progress toward settlement seems to have been made. A single secret meeting on the issue was held between the two states in July 1986, reportedly without agreement. It can be assumed that Sabah was on the agenda for the visit of Deputy Foreign Minister Jose Ingles to Kuala Lumpur at the end of January 1987. A subsequent "informal" visit to Malaysia by Foreign Minister Laurel in midyear did not lead to any breakthrough in negotiations.

22. Salvador P. Laurel, "New Directions in Philippines Foreign Policy," address delivered before the Philippine Council for Foreign Relations, 10 April 1986, text in *Foreign Relations Journal* (Manila), I:2 (June 1986), pp. 3-4.

23. Statement by constitutional lawyer Irene Cortes, Executive Vice-President, University of the Philippines, on the panel, "The New Constitution and the Rebuilding of Democratic Institutions and Processes," at the conference, "A New Road for the Philippines," October 1986, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

24. Adolfo Azeuna as quoted in the *Straits Times*, 27 October 1986.

25. *Straits Times*, 4 March 1986.

The ambiguities of the Aquino government's approach to the Sabah issue again reflect structural continuity with the foreign policy of its predecessor. President Aquino, no more than President Marcos, can escape the fact that the Sabah claim is bound up in the irrationalities of Filipino nationalism as well as the domestic political exigencies of Muslim politics. Armed with a new political mandate and a popularly approved full term of office, Mrs. Aquino might be in a position to cut through some of the domestic interests that have kept the claim alive. But for now the Sabah claim continues to operate to bedevil Philippines-Malaysia relations and patterns of ASEAN cooperation. The long-awaited third ASEAN summit was first scheduled for mid-1987, but within three months of its announcement it was pushed back to December. By then, it was hoped, the Sabah issue would be swept away, no longer motivating Malaysia's reluctance to grace Manila with the presence of its prime minister.

ASEAN and the U.S. Bases Issue

One item that will not be on the agenda for the projected ASEAN summit will be the question of the future of U.S. bases in the Philippines. The ASEAN norm of noninterference in the domestic affairs of member states will apply once again. This does not mean that the ASEAN partners are disinterested in the eventual outcome of U.S.-Philippines bilateral negotiations on the subject. On the contrary, it is very likely that the question of the bases, perhaps euphemized in terms of "regional stability," will be the subject of off-the-record, private exchanges between President Aquino and her ASEAN counterparts. If ASEAN leaders hold true to form, their backchannel advice to her will be similar to that they gave to Marcos—compromise with the United States and do not force a U.S. withdrawal from the bases.

For the short term, the Aquino government's policy towards the bases is satisfactory to ASEAN: honor the agreements in force but make no commitments in advance about the future. The fear in some ASEAN quarters that Mrs. Aquino might give major concessions on the bases to negotiate an any price "reconciliation" with the armed left has been dispelled.²⁶ Furthermore, her options with respect to the bases have not been foreclosed through constitutional provisions terminating the U.S. military presence. ASEAN is aware, however, of the fact that the new constitution has declared the Philippines as "nuclear weapons free" and that it restricts executive latitude in decision making on the bases. Any future agreement

26. This apprehension was expressed to the author in interviews in Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand in July and August 1986.

must be ratified by the Philippines Senate, which can put it before the electorate in a plebiscite. This obviously means that the future of the bases will in part depend upon the outcome of an intensely polarizing internal political debate, and at this point no one can judge that outcome. As we approach 1988, the year prescribed for the beginning of the second five-year review and reassessment of the bases agreement, and then the crucial date of September 16, 1990, the start of the one-year prior notice period stipulated in the termination clause of the agreement, ASEAN will nervously have to wait and see.

Senior Philippine government officials are very aware of the fact that the ASEAN partners do have security interests at stake in the outcome of the base negotiations. Emmanuel Pelaez, currently Philippines Ambassador to the United States, is a major figure in that process. He acknowledges that the regional strategic balance contributes to security in Southeast Asia and that the Philippines "cannot resolve the question solely on the basis of her own self-interest—she must also consider the interests of her neighbors and friends."²⁷ More specifically:

In this endeavor, Philippine leaders cannot afford to be parochial or insular. While their primary responsibility is to the people, they cannot discharge that responsibility unless they deal objectively and justly with the interests of other countries which may be affected by our decisions, especially our ASEAN partners and Asian/Pacific neighbors, and the countries with whom we have friendly relations.²⁸

The final determinant, of course, will be Philippines national interest. On this issue there are deep divisions of opinion, although we may say that the perceptual gulf between the Aquino government and the kinds of opinions articulated by the late Senator Diokno and the forces he marshalled in the Anti-Base Coalition is not as great as that between Marcos and the Coalition. This essay on the Philippines and ASEAN is not the place to go into the internal bases debate or to rehearse the pro- and antibase arguments, but we can note a growing consensus within the Filipino elite that ASEAN interests in the U.S. contribution to the regional military balance must be more concretely expressed. Put bluntly, there is a feeling in Manila that ASEAN has been getting a "free ride" on the U.S.-Philippines bilateral security relationship. While enjoying the supposed benefits of regional stability supported by a balance-of-power, the other ASEAN states have not had to pay the political, security, cultural, and other costs of having the

27. Emmanuel Pelaez, "The Military Bases in the Philippines: The Past and the Future," *Foreign Relations Journal* (Manila), 1:1 (January 1986), pp. 30–31.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

bases. While Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia espouse foreign policies of nonalignment, they wish the Philippines to stay aligned. While ASEAN's declaratory policy is for a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), the Philippines' partners argue that until a ZOPFAN can be realized the U.S. presence in the bases is necessary for ASEAN's collective security.

We can discern the emergence of a policy line in Manila that insists that there be more burden sharing of the requirements of collective security—that the American presence be in some way dispersed. In other words, unlike the Marcos government, the Aquino government as a member of ASEAN does not want to be isolated with a superpower. While not a member of the government then, Raul Manglapus expressed a growing elite sentiment when he argued that ASEAN must come to a common position and accept an American military presence as a joint political responsibility.²⁹ This is a position with which a member of the government can associate himself and add that the bases “no longer can be treated in the context of Philippine-American bilateral relations.”³⁰ Realistically, however, it would not seem that there is another context. Significantly, Manglapus, who had been elected to the Senate, was named foreign minister in September 1987, succeeding Laurel who resigned and allied himself with the right-opposition to the Aquino government.

There is no evidence that ASEAN is examining its “collective responsibility” or is looking at any concrete measures to pick up the burden in case of the “loss” of the Philippine bases. Queries in ASEAN as to the possible redistribution of some of the functional tasks and missions now carried out from the U.S. bases in the Philippines are turned aside. For example, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, when asked if Singapore would be willing to provide alternative sites, replied: “Do you know the length of the outer perimeter of Clark Air Base? The length of the outer perimeter of Clark Air Base is 26 miles. That is exactly the length of Singapore.”³¹ This bit of sophistry is often favorably quoted by Singapore officials and diplomats. It ignores the fact that facilities do exist in Singapore, as they do in every other country of ASEAN including Brunei, that could pick up some of the slack if U.S. forces had to be redeployed from the Philippines.

Obviously the question of “burden sharing” in ASEAN is not a question of facilities, but of politics. As Malaysian security analyst Muthiah Alagappa put it: “Although the ASEAN states value the bases, they do not

29. Statement made at the conference, “A New Road for the Philippines.”

30. Ibid. Ambassador Pelaez, responding to Manglapus.

31. *Straits Times*, 11 November 1985.

want to host them.”³² The political question is now even sharper as a result of the new face of Soviet policy in Asia after Gorbachev’s celebrated July 1986 Vladivostok speech. In the speech he stated: “I would like to say that if the U.S. were to give up its military presence in the Philippines, let’s say, we would not leave this step unanswered.”³³ What the Soviet leader meant in terms of specific acts has not been specified. However, some Filipinos have sought to link the termination of U.S. base rights in the Philippines to negotiations for a reduction of the Soviet presence in Vietnam, explicitly casting these moves as steps toward the realization of ZOPFAN, thus generalizing, in a very different way, the superpower context for the ASEAN states. The ASEAN response to what might be called the Gorbachev fishing expedition has been extremely cautious. For ASEAN, the proof of Soviet intentions is to be found in the USSR’s continued support for Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea.

Most ASEAN analysts would realistically conclude that the prospect for a nuclear weapons-free ZOPFAN, in which security equidistance from the superpowers can be maintained, is embedded in the global strategic relationship between the superpowers. Until the ZOPFAN can be translated from a declaratory policy to an operational regional regime, and as long as ASEAN finds it necessary for the United States to be a military actor in the regional balance, a forced relocation of the U.S. bases from Southeast Asia would be destabilizing. Even so, accepting that certain ASEAN states—Thailand and Singapore—might be willing to provide some necessary facilities for U.S. deployments to the region from, say mid-Pacific bases, there would be no collective ASEAN response to a termination of U.S. base rights in the Philippines.

The Philippines and National Resilience

One of the most important shared perceptions in ASEAN is that the major threats to its security and stability are internal. Historically, every ASEAN state has faced the problem of armed insurgency. One of the common experiences often cited as leading to the formation of ASEAN was the struggle against armed communism. The ASEAN states have sought to deal with internal threat through the application of measures of “national resilience,” a term that has come to mean the planned mobilization of the social, economic, ideological, cultural, and security forces of the state in a politically integrative manner in a developing and equitable econ-

32. Muthiah Alagappa, *US-ASEAN Co-operation: Limits and Possibilities*, ISIS Research Note (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1986), p. 24.

33. *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 38:30, 27 August 1986.

omy.³⁴ In the logic (ideology) of ASEAN it is both the level of "national resilience" and the pattern of ASEAN cooperation that defines "regional resilience." For ASEAN leaders, the final years of the Marcos government failed the test of "national resilience." The question now is whether President Aquino can get the Philippines back on track so that peace and stability is restored and the Philippines can again contribute to "regional resilience."

What can ASEAN do to assist in building "national resilience" in the Philippines? The ASEAN states have given Mrs. Aquino political support, unhesitatingly and fully accepting the legitimacy of her government. And their token measures of economic and technical assistance have symbolically demonstrated an ASEAN-wide commitment to the Philippines recovery. On the other hand, as noted above, there seems little possibility that ASEAN will restructure itself so as to promote a larger Filipino share in the ASEAN markets. Perhaps ASEAN's greatest economic contribution to "national resilience" in the Philippines will come through its bloc leverage in the ASEAN "dialogues" with Japan, the United States and the European Economic Community. With ASEAN, the Philippines need not deal in isolation with its main trading partners. There even may be a kind of perversely beneficial spillover into ASEAN in connection with the need to restructure Manila's international economic ties. For example, other ASEAN countries also suffer from debt burden, particularly yen-denominated debt, and there would be strong pressure to generalize relief measures for the Philippines to other member states.

With respect to the coercive or suppressive aspects of "national resilience"—that is, directly addressing the problem of growing communist and NPA strength in the Philippines—there is little the other ASEAN states can do other than offer advice from their own successful counter-insurgent struggles. There is no question that they are concerned. In every face-to-face bilateral meeting President Aquino has had with ASEAN leaders the problem of the communist insurgency has been high on the agenda. ASEAN leaders have been both troubled and heartened by the Aquino approach. They were troubled by the ceasefire and negotiations with the armed left because they felt only the government would be willing to make concessions. They were heartened by continuity in leadership of the security forces, particularly Gen. Ramos who is well known to his ASEAN counterparts. The collapse of the peace talks was not unexpected and, to

34. The term "national resilience" (*ketahanan nasional*) as it is used throughout ASEAN today was first coined in Indonesia in the 1960s. It was popularized by President Suharto and propagated in the ASEAN region by Indonesia officials. It has now lost its specifically Indonesian reference and appears in ASEAN-wide rhetoric.

the extent that it galvanized the regime into greater efforts in the field against the insurgents, may have been welcomed in other ASEAN security circles. While the doctrines of "national" and "regional resilience" minimize reliance on external assistance, more active and direct American security assistance to the Philippines in the war against the insurgents, if it should be deemed necessary, would be politically acceptable to ASEAN.

Conclusion

Leaders in ASEAN realize that the consensual structure of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations probably could not accommodate a radical nationalist or socialist member state. The Aquino government as it is currently constituted, while dramatically different in style from most of its ASEAN partners, has essentially the same world view and developmental orientations as the other ASEAN states. It does not represent political discontinuity in the ASEAN regime. As we have suggested above, the interests pursued in ASEAN by Manila under President Aquino are not all that different from the interests promoted through ASEAN by the Marcos government. The Philippines crisis was the first major test of the impact of regime change on the workings of ASEAN. The way in which ASEAN adapted to the transfer of power in the Philippines bodes well for future transfers of power in other states as long as new leaderships share the values underpinning what might be called the political economy of ASEAN.

Ironically, however, President Aquino's promise of a revitalization of the Philippines' commitment to ASEAN occurs at a time when ASEAN itself is drifting, looking for a new blueprint. The upcoming Manila summit is seen as an opportunity to revitalize ASEAN. Perhaps at the site of "people power" a new ASEAN political will power can be demonstrated.