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"A War of Quick Decision":
The Philippine Military Considers A New Strategy

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Dear Peter,

"AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] combat statistics showing casualties...underscore [the] stark finding that the AFP at this point in time has failed to seize the initiative in major combat operations against the CTs [Communist Terrorists]."

AFP Counter-insurgency Appraisal
Report for First Quarter of 1988

When Senator and former Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile read from portions of the above secret report in a speech in late July, he touched off a minor firestorm in Manila. His speech and subsequent leaks to the press refuted government statements that it was winning the war against the insurgency. For one week, the report and rebuttals by defense officials filled the headlines. The following week, Manila's attention turned to its next crisis.

What went largely unnoticed, however, were two questions. Why was the report written and who was it intended for? The report was delivered at a closed-door command conference of senior AFP officers in May to jolt the military into rethinking its counter-insurgency strategy. An officer knowledgeable about the report believes that unless the AFP comes up with a new strategy to defeat the communist New People's Army (NPA) in two years, the NPA will eventually win. Partially as a

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result of the report, top AFP officials are now reviewing a new "campaign plan" for fighting "a war of quick decision" over the next two to three years. A 168-page AFP study spells out in considerable detail the key elements of this proposed campaign plan. Both the specific contents of the AFP study and the review of the proposed campaign plan have yet to be reported.

Because this newsletter focuses on the military's response to insurgency--the AFP's study and campaign plan--it ignores the broader and more important political, economic, and social issues related to insurgency. By the time this newsletter arrives, the new campaign plan, if approved, probably will have been publicized. Although this newsletter describes the proposed strategy in detail, it does not reveal the plan's technical aspects, which might be seen as hindering implementation. Moreover, as a knowledgeable officer states, "Even if enemy knows our plan, they can't do anything about it."

I. The Report

First, a brief outline of the strength and strategy of the Philippine revolutionary movement. According to AFP figures, there are some 30,000 members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The armed wing of the CPP, the NPA, fields some 25,800 "regulars" with 15,500 firearms in 73 guerrilla fronts throughout the Philippines. The majority of these regulars are militia members rather than full-time fighters. Of the 41,630 barangays (villages) in the Philippines 20%, about 8,500, are "affected" by the insurgency. Of these villages, about half are, in military terminology, CPP/NPA "influenced." That means that cadres have established a revolutionary government with peasant's, women's, and youth organizations.

On the government's side, the AFP has about 160,000 personnel, many of them tied to desk jobs. Currently, about 77 Army and Marine battalions, each of 600 men, engage in combat operations. Approximately 200 Constabulary companies, each of about 200 men, also conduct some offensive operations but primarily guard towns and fixed installations. In addition, 70,000 members of the paramilitary Civilian Home Defense Force and an unknown number of civilian volunteers, or vigilantes, are now being organized into Citizen's Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs).

The party's strategy follows Mao's classic protracted war in which the revolutionary forces proceed through three stages--the strategic defensive, the strategic stalemate, and the strategic offensive. In the strategic defensive the revolutionary forces, while weaker than the government, continue to build up their army. In the strategic stalemate, the revolutionary forces achieve rough parity with the government, although they may be numerically inferior. For some years the party has stated that when it acquires about 25,000 high-powered rifles (it now has about 8,000) it will reach this stage. In the strategic offensive, large NPA formations defeat

the AFP in fixed battles.

The AFP's operations center delivered a sharp message through its report to the senior military commanders: the AFP's current strategy permits the NPA to fight its kind of war and slowly gain the strategic initiative. A knowledgeable officer says, "The longer the war drags on, the stronger the enemy gets."

The report showed that while the AFP was slightly ahead on the total "body-count" by winning numerous small engagements, the NPA won the big ones. For the first three months of 1988, the AFP initiated 55% of 480 engagements, suffering 597 casualties to 656 for the NPA. But the arms-hungry NPA captured more firearms, especially high-powered firearms with 320 captured by the NPA to 199 recovered by the government. In "major engagements" the NPA initiated the majority, sustaining 180 casualties to 311 for the government. In these major engagements the NPA also captured 259 high-powered firearms while losing only 54 high-powered firearms. A "major engagement" is one resulting in either side suffering 5 or more casualties or either side losing 5 or more firearms. But most dramatically, the NPA initiated 14 of 15 "decisive engagements" (those resulting in 10 or more casualties or firearms lost), suffering only 26 casualties to 146 for the government.

Of course, statistics on NPA casualties and even firearms captured are imprecise. A non-American foreign military officer claims that the figures on NPA casualties are inflated and "just don't stand up to examination." On the other side, an AFP officer says that field commanders routinely underreport firearms captured in order to arm civilian groups or just to give away an AK-47 as a souvenir. Nevertheless, the report's statistics demonstrated that to a large degree the NPA dictates the course of the war.

How is the outnumbered and under-armed NPA able to defeat the AFP in, what are by Philippine standards, the big battles? The report blamed the military's current strategy that disperses troops in small, fixed detachments to guard far-flung towns instead of concentrating troops for large offensives. The report warned that this "opens the AFP to defeat in detail by a numerically inferior enemy...It places the AFP in a passive position and reduces government forces to the conduct of routine patrols that bring no decisive result."

The report noted that detachments of about 20 men are vulnerable to attack by large 100 to 200 man NPA units. A senior AFP officer says the NPA may spend more than a month preparing for an attack or ambush. According to this officer, "The NPA is more deliberate in planning [than the AFP]. They are better at it than us." Although this adherence to meticulous planning comes from the past, and perhaps present, necessity of conserving ammunition, it still serves the NPA well.

Two months after the report was presented privately at AFP command conference, someone leaked it to the press to discredit the government. The AFP's leadership soon rebutted with the following arguments. For one, the AFP was tied up guarding ballot boxes during the January local elections instead of conducting offensives. Secretary of Defense Fidel Ramos presented updated figures for the first half of 1988 that purportedly showed improvements over the first three months. Moreover because the report analyzed just combat operations it dealt with only 20% to 30% of the entire picture relating to the war. Not included in the report were the AFP's claims that some 7,000 rebels had surrendered. The AFP also arrested top party and NPA leaders: Rafael Baylosis, CPP Secretary General; Benjamin de Vera, party Vice Chairman; Romulo Kintanar, head of the NPA; the head of the NPA for Mindanao; and key party members for Central Luzon. Finally, according to various AFP officers, NPA growth slowed from about 7% or 8% for 1987 to 3% for the first six months of 1988.

But serious qualifications come with each of these achievements. The AFP's performance improved for the second quarter of 1988 in several areas, such as capturing more arms than the NPA. But a senior AFP officer says that for the first half of 1988 the AFP continued to "lose" the "major engagements" with 60% initiated by the NPA. Brig. Gen. Rodolfo Biazon, Commandant of the Philippine Marines, acknowledges that losing the big battles is bad for morale. As for the near decapitation of the party and NPA leadership, the highly-decentralized revolutionary movement has weathered such blows in the past. While the arrests set back the party's time table, Philippine and Western military officials say that the party has no lack of talented cadres.

In public, the AFP's leadership downplayed the significance of the report. But privately, the report's suggestions gained wider acceptance in the AFP. It recommended that "the AFP should reassess its position to come up with a concept of operations firmed up towards winning major battles and not merely the minor ones." Says Gen. Biazon: "We really have to do that. We have to plan a campaign in which we prioritize areas of the country and put more resources into those areas. And we are doing it."

II. The Odd Couple

Two hard-working officers brought about this major reassessment by the AFP's leadership. Some officers like to take their afternoon siesta. Col. Lisandro Abadia, AFP Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, and his assistant, Lt. Col. Victor Corpus, Chief of Combat Operations Research, begin their workday at 7 A.M. and often continue into the evening. They appear to work well as a team, but they must be the odd couple of the AFP.

Col. Abadia, former operations officer for the Army under President Marcos, was caught on the wrong side of the 1986 February Revolution. Afterwards, then-AFP Chief of Staff Gen. Ramos didn't trust Col. Abadia, so he was exiled to the Philippine Military Academy where he looked after teenage cadets. He clearly won back that trust during last year's August 28 coup attempt. Col. Abadia was the one officer at the academy who prevented the cadets from leaving the camp to join the coup (see ERG-6). After getting a long-sought command of an Army brigade in Northern Luzon, Col. Abadia was reassigned in January to head AFP operations--a post normally reserved for star rank. A blunt-talking officer, he once expressed the sentiment common among Army officers that "The Philippine Constabulary will fight to the last Army man." The Constabulary has supplied the last two AFP Chiefs of Staff and dominates counter-insurgency strategy, which some Army officers claim is too wedded to garrison duty. Army officers sometimes grumble that Army units are called in when the Constabulary gets in trouble.

Lt. Col. Corpus, a Constabulary officer, says that in his current position he wants to "make up" for what he did before. In 1970, Victor Corpus, then an idealistic political science instructor at the Philippine Military Academy, raided the academy's armory and joined the NPA. The Lieutenant undoubtedly brought important military skills to the NPA, which was just over a year old and, according to military figures, had less than 250 armed regulars. In 1976, Ka (Comrade) Corpus, disillusioned with the party, surrendered to the military and remained imprisoned until 1986. From his experience with the NPA, says Col. Corpus, "I know their Achilles' heel." He adds that some officers, such as Navy Captain Rex Robles who backed the August 28 coup attempt, believe that he is really a double agent for the NPA. Whichever side wins the war, Victor Corpus will have made a significant contribution to the winning side. For he wrote the 168-page study that is the basis for the proposed campaign plan.

Col. Abadia and Lt. Col. Corpus contribute divergent, yet complimentary skills to the operations center. Col. Abadia, falsely labeled a Marcos officer, draws on years of experience in the field and in operations. Lt. Col. Corpus brings an explicitly Maoist political and military analysis. Both have long thought that the AFP's "static" deployment is wrong. In December of 1985, Col. Abadia argued against the Constabulary-influenced style of defending towns and fixed installations. Lt. Col. Corpus has been thinking about a new counter-insurgency strategy since 1984. Together, the two officers combine the field experience and analysis necessary to move a bureaucracy.

III. The Study

Although the specifics of the AFP study and the proposed campaign plan remain little-known, talk of a new strategy has been in the air. Secretary Ramos has announced that the AFP has a new plan for winning the war in two to three years but

has not described it in detail. A single article in the Philippine Daily Globe last May said that there was a new strategy for a war of quick decision named Balikwas (lit. to jump up from a lying position because of fear or surprise). But the article, by one of Manila's best reporters, did not discuss the strategy in detail. One officer said that because of the article they had to scrap the catchy name.

The proposed campaign plan now has a more upbeat and still-secret new name--Lambat-Bitag, or dragnet-snare (lit. a dragnet for catching fish-a snare for catching birds). One hundred and twenty-four pages in length, the classified plan will be distributed to top AFP officers on September 19. The unclassified study by Col. Corpus, entitled The Silent War: A Manual on Unconventional Warfare, describes the essential elements of the campaign plan and will eventually be published as a book. When an earlier version of the study circulated within the AFP last November, Lt. Col. Corpus won more converts. Yet, even the operations center had little enthusiasm for a new strategy until Col. Abadia took over in January, replacing a Constabulary officer. One version of the study now forms part of the curriculum at the Philippine Command and General Staff College. The major service commanders have reviewed and endorsed the campaign plan, with the ever-efficient Navy the first service to respond with its suggested changes. Approval by the AFP Chief of Staff, Gen. Renato De Villa, is expected. An AFP officer says that higher, political offices will decide whether and when the plan will be unveiled.

The study begins with the premise that the AFP's current strategy permits the NPA to follow its own plan for a protracted war in which it is "slowly gaining the strategic initiative." To counter this, the AFP must launch "a war of quick decision" while there is still time. A war of quick decision "aims at dismantling, in the shortest time possible, the major guerrilla fronts and decisively defeating the main enemy forces in these fronts through simultaneous and sustained campaigns of 'gradual constriction.'"

Under this strategy of gradual constriction, AFP battalions will encircle a select number of the NPA's 73 guerrilla fronts and then slowly "counter-organize" villages, thus tightening rings of pro-government villages around the guerrilla base camps. The eventual destruction of most of these targeted guerrilla fronts within one to two years would "push the momentum in favor of the AFP" and constitute a "strategic victory." Approximately 12 to 15 of the most important guerrilla fronts will be targeted.

The strategy of gradual constriction combines two tactics currently employed by the AFP. First, squad-sized units, called Special Operations Teams (SOTs), counter-organize villages primarily through dialogue sessions, persuasion, and assistance. Originally developed in Mindanao, SOTs have proven effective by winning over villagers and then destroying the party's political structure. SOTs may work for over a month in a village under the protection of a nearby battalion. In Manila,

Gen. Biazon, who also heads the military in the capital region, has even set up an SOT in a large squatter area adjacent to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Manila's most luxurious hotel.

Second, the AFP establishes armed civilian groups, the CAFGUs, to consolidate these newly-won villages. The CAFGUs, comprised of vigilante groups but under stricter supervision, seal off possible guerrilla escape routes and provide an effective intelligence net. By denying the NPA sanctuaries, the CAFGUs take over garrison duty and free up regular AFP units for further offensive operations.

This process continues with SOTs patiently organizing every successive village closer to the guerrilla's rear base area. According to the study, unlike in current AFP "search and destroy [operations], the mobile teams do not rush head-on in search of the insurgents, but move clandestinely and gradually, organizing barangays step by step....If the rebel forces now conduct a strategic retreat towards the central district of the front in order to concentrate their forces in prepared ambush positions, they will be left waiting in the 'killing zones' for months on end but with no target appearing."

After sustained counter-organizing traps the elusive guerrillas, the AFP engages the guerrilla front's main force in a "decisive battle." An AFP officer says the key to victory is that "we can force the enemy to fight on our terms."

Overall, the campaign strategy of gradual constriction represents "a departure from previous AFP 'search and destroy' campaigns which are [of] relatively short duration and usually [produce] no decisive result." Two key elements set the strategy of gradual constriction apart from past practice. First, the AFP directs sustained campaigns against a certain number of priority guerrilla fronts. Second, success comes through organizing mass support for the government, not conventional military operations.

To implement the new strategy, the study calls for wide-ranging changes in troop deployment. Each targetted front will be under a single officer instead of the current hodge-podge of overlapping commanders. (The NPA often establishes base areas on the borders of provinces to frustrate coordinated government action.) Depending on the size of the guerrilla front, the commander will usually coordinate three highly mobile battalions, each composed of three companies with at least one SOT per company. For the first time, says a senior AFP officer, field commanders will be held responsible for destroying a set number of guerrilla fronts within one year. Not surprisingly, an AFP officer says that some traditionally-minded field commanders oppose these changes to their established routines.

In philosophy too, the study breaks with past Philippine counter-insurgency plans--Letter of Instruction (LOI) Katagan

(lit. stability) issued in 1981 and LOI Mamamayan (lit. citizenry) promulgated under the Aquino administration. According to an AFP officer, these two classified plans were copied from U.S. Army manuals. "We have been so attached to the Americans," he says. "[But] you have lost miserably in Vietnam, so of course we are not going to follow your example." The proposed strategy follows an unabashedly Maoist line. "Waves" of SOTs conduct NPA-style "social investigations" in villages to discover grievances and set up pro-government "organizations parallel to the [communist] mass organizations." The study even describes how "gradual constriction is our answer to the enemy's [Mao's] sixteen character formula." (When the enemy advances, we retreat. When the enemy camps, we harass. When the enemy tires, we attack. When the enemy withdraws, we pursue.)

While the study has influenced many officers, its Maoist tenor must have raised eyebrows among some of them. One officer told Lt. Col. Corpus that if his study had been submitted before the Philippine Command and General Staff College as a student's thesis rather than as part of the curriculum, it would have been rejected. Indeed, some of the study's more radical suggestions are not included in the proposed campaign plan.

For instance, the study says that in enemy controlled areas military units vulnerable to attack--small detachments, checkpoints, local police, and armed civilian groups--should initially be withdrawn. It calls armed citizens groups in NPA territory "armories" for the insurgents. The study also criticizes the elite Scout Rangers for conducting clandestine patrols and ambushes in NPA areas instead of organizing villagers. It dismisses the Rangers' ambush tactics as producing only "small victories." In addition, the report faults the AFP's reliance on armored vehicles because it gives "a false sense of security" and keeps troops tied to the main roads, leaving the hinterland to the NPA. Instead of employing armored transport, which is vulnerable to powerful NPA land mines, the study proposes the judicious use of helicopters for transport and resupply, and occasionally as gunships.

But this gets at whether helicopters ought to be used under the proposed campaign plan. As noted in a previous newsletter (ERG-7), the Philippine and American military bureaucracies in Manila have pushed for the extensive use of helicopters. A Western military official says the AFP now has the "right mix" of helicopters, which gives the AFP an important psychological edge and also inhibits the NPA in the daytime. But according to Philippine and foreign military officers, helicopter pilots use lax methods for distinguishing friend from foe. (The NPA has already caught on that government soldiers identify themselves as friendly by burning green leaves to produce white smoke and will probably pick up the latest method.) A non-American foreign military official, who has experience in winning a guerrilla war, argues that helicopters should be used sparingly--only for medical evacuation and resupply. He says that "helicopters will not make one jot of a difference for winning the war." The official not only

criticizes any plan that relies on helicopters, he makes the more sweeping claim that for the Philippine military, "Their theory is terrific, but the soldier on the ground is just not aggressive."

IV. Implementation

The proposed campaign plan is likely to be approved and formally written up as a Letter of Instruction. The main task, says an AFP officer, remains convincing field commanders to implement the new strategy. The officer confidently predicts that "in two to three years we will be able to win a strategic victory."

Various foreign military officials who are familiar with the general thrust of the proposed campaign plan have praised the concept of a war of quick decision. But a Western military official cautions, "It's going to be a lot more difficult than they expect. Planning is easy. Implementation and execution is the hard part."

Personnel constraints alone could hamper implementation. Targetting approximately 12 to 15 guerrilla fronts with an average of three battalions for each front might mean tying down almost half of the Army and Marine combat battalions now engaged in counter-insurgency operations. One officer suggests that a Constabulary battalion could replace one of the Army or Marine battalions as the back-up force in each area. But Army officers may feel uncomfortable relying on the Constabulary to rescue them. A senior officer says that the "CAFGUs are really very important" in containing the other, non-targetted guerrilla fronts. The officer admits that the AFP will be "stretched" to prevent the NPA from expanding in these areas. But, he says, "it's a calculated thing. Rather than going around in circles, we might as well do this systematically [destroying targetted fronts.]"

In addition, the study calls for slightly over 100 SOTs--at least one for each of the nine companies deployed against a single guerrilla front. A Western military official worries that the AFP "doesn't have the resources to keep the teams alive." In addition, once a SOT convinces villagers that life under the government is better, civilian follow-up with social services will be essential. In resource-rich Manila, Gen. Biazon says that there are no separate funds set aside for such services.

A Western military official says that a "serious" counter-insurgency program should transfer extra combat battalions from Mindanao to more critical areas, such as Northern Luzon where, according to the May operations report, the NPA had scored its biggest successes. AFP officers say that the proposed campaign plan does not entail relocating units to other regions. Currently, two of the three Marine brigades are based in Mindanao, serving primarily as a deterrent to

the relatively dormant Muslim separatists. Past and present Marine Commandants have failed in their efforts to transfer Marine units to NPA areas in the central Visayan islands or the main island of Luzon. The Army doesn't want the Marines encroaching on its turf while the Navy would lose part of its rationale for a large base in Zamboanga City if the Marines pull out.

Personnel shortages may also crimp plans for retraining and "reorienting" soldiers, which the study deems essential. According to a Western military official, the AFP doesn't have the luxury of pulling out whole battalions for retraining. The study says that training for SOT duty will take place in the field.

Finally, to paraphrase General Slim, if the soldier on the ground doesn't pull the trigger in time, then all the staff, generals, and plans behind him are useless. A non-American military official says that the Philippine soldier, lacking the ideological drive of his NPA counterpart, "has no instinctive will to close with the enemy." Other foreigners, however, take a more evenhanded view. Philippine officers sometimes complain that it's difficult to motivate battalion commanders when Manila's leading families--last names like Cojuangco, Elizalde, and Zobel--don't fill the roster of active officers.

Traditionally, the Philippine left is recognized for producing seminal position papers and careful analysis that correctly charted and redirected the growth of the revolutionary movement. The next two years will show whether the AFP has now done the same.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot

Received in Hanover 9/19/88