

The strategic importance of Subic Bay and Clark Air Base

by Paul Goldstein

Contrary to the cynical and evil fools directing U.S. strategic political-military policy toward the Philippines, the announcement in July by Philippines Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile that his country may be forced to abrogate the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty, is no idle threat aimed at rhetorically countering the provocative pronouncements from the State Department and the Congress. It reflects a qualitative shift in the thinking of Philippine leaders, both in the Marcos government and the moderate centrist opposition.

The announcement manifested complete frustration with the devious manipulations conducted by officials of the State Department and the Congress, led by William Sullivan, the special adviser to State and former ambassador to both Iran and the Philippines, and by Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-N. Y.). In cahoots with Sullivan and Solarz are Undersecretary for Political Affairs Michael Armacost and Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage.

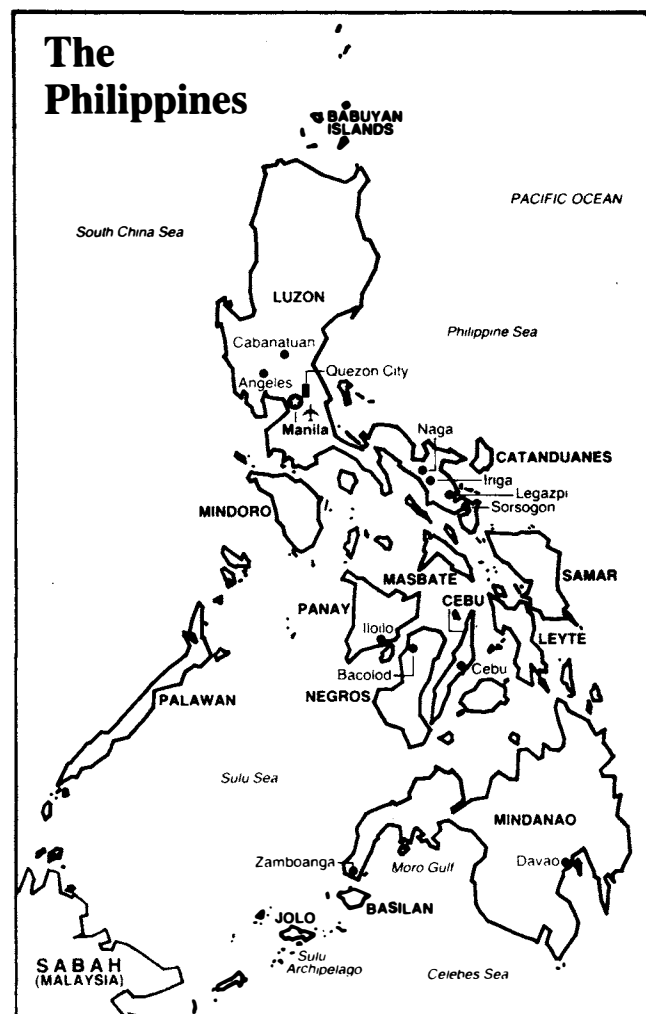
In fact, what is now erupting is a strong Filipino nationalism, which views the present American policy as a near complete betrayal by the United States of its closest Asian ally. Even members of the legitimate Filipino opposition who are trying to portray themselves as alternatives to President Marcos, resent the high-handed arrogance displayed by State Department and Central Intelligence Agency officials' handling of the questions of the Philippines' domestic political situation and the status of the U.S.-leased bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Field.

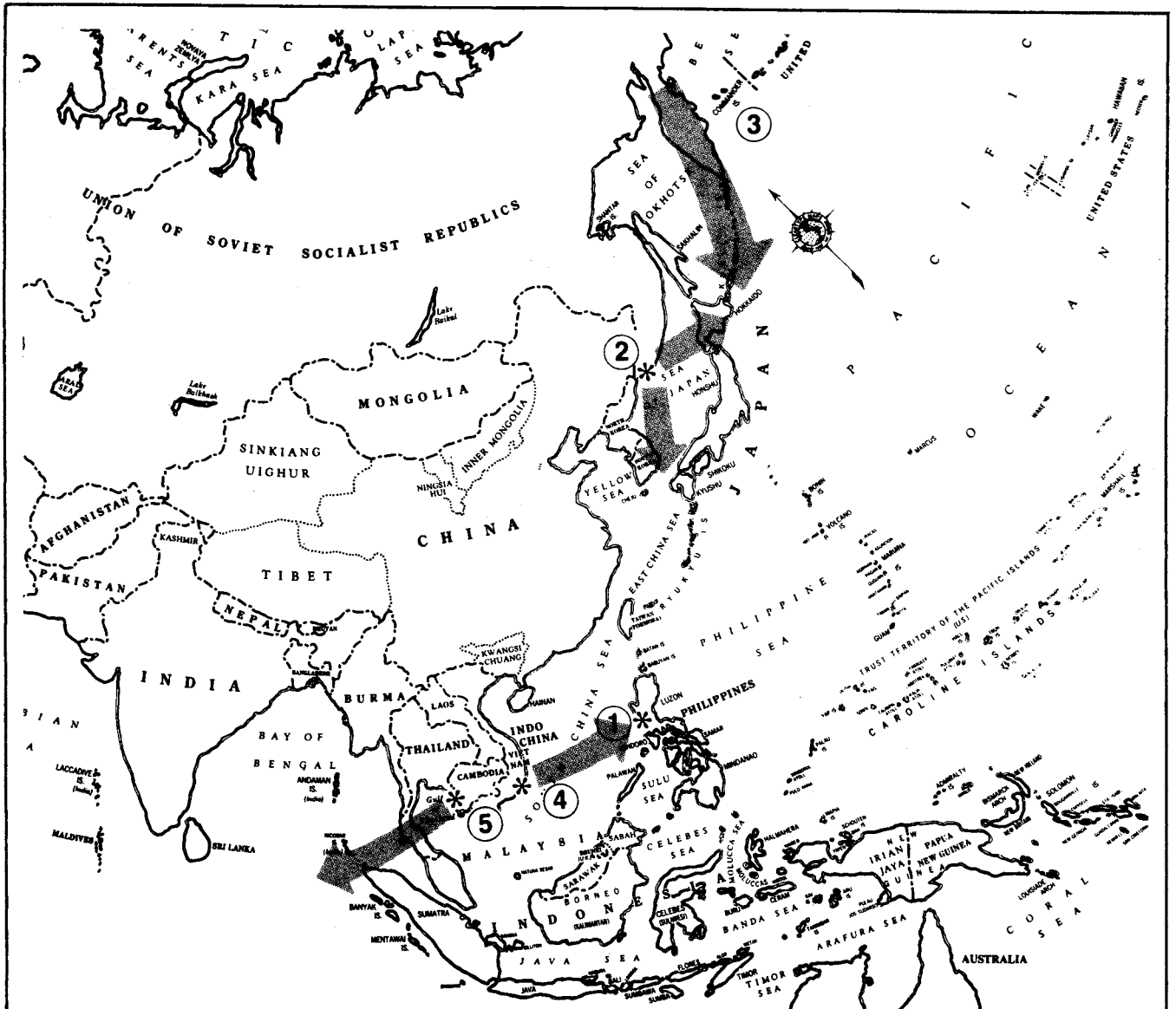
"What are the Americans doing?" the Filipinos ask. "Don't they know what the strategic implications are? Did it ever occur to the Americans that even the opposition doesn't trust them?"

No one in the Philippines is unaware of the implications of the strategic crisis developing in the Pacific rim and the Philippines itself. U.S. military planners are faced with an ever-growing Soviet strategic threat to the entire region. It simply amazes leading Filipinos that one of the major activities of U.S. military planners is drawing up contingency plans for changing bases to another site or digging in to stay, assuming communist domination of the islands—like the situation which prevails at the Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba.

It is a well-known fact that without Subic Naval and Clark Air Base, the United States cannot defend the Pacific Northwest and the rest of Southeast Asia. Any U.S. State or Defense Department official who claims that Australia, Saipan, Guam or any other area could take the place of the Philippines is virtually guaranteeing complete Soviet domination of the area.

The Soviet strategic build-up in the Pacific is centered





1. U.S. military facilities at Clark Air Field and Subic Bay, in the Philippines
 2. Vladivostok
 3. Soviet build-up on Kurile Islands and Sakhalin Island
 4. Soviet air and naval base at Cam Ranh Bay, in Vietnam
 5. Soviet installations now in progress at port of Kompong Som, in Kampuchea
- Arrows show Soviet deployment capabilities.

around the Pacific Northwest and Southeast Asia. The Soviets are concentrating their efforts at intimidating U.S. allies, but also at preparing for the military-strategic defeat of the United States in the Pacific. Admiral Foley, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, stated that the Russians posed a threat not only in the northern Pacific, but along the entire Pacific rim into the South Pacific and Indian Oceans.

The Soviets are engaged in moves preparatory to occupying the strategic choke-points needed for a naval breakout

from their Pacific base in Vladivostok. Primarily the Russians have engaged their special forces' miniature submarine units in the Straits of Soya, Tsugaru, and Tsushima. Mini-submarine tracks have been identified in these straits, indicating contingency plans for amphibious landings to seize control of those waterways—critical for the naval breakout from Vladivostok.

Moscow's Pacific Fleet now exceeds the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The Soviet naval build-up includes 830 surface and combat ships with 2 mid-size aircraft carriers, 14 cruisers,

30 destroyers, 31 missile submarines, 103 attack submarines, and 2 major amphibious landing ships. Half of the ships are combat vessels.

In addition, 40% of all Soviet ICBMs and submarine-based missiles are positioned in the Far East, along with 30% of Soviet medium-range missiles, the SS-20s. The military build-up continues on the Soviet-occupied Kurile Islands, which historically have been part of Japan, until they were seized by the Russians at the end of World War II.

In terms of land forces, the Russians have 52 divisions on the Sino-Soviet border—about 450,000 men, including two crack airborne units in Mongolia.

Within this strategic context, it is clear why the Subic Bay and Clark military bases are essential for the defense of the Pacific rim. The greatest 20th century military strategist and hero of World War II, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, understood the strategic importance of the Philippines for sustaining a warfighting capability in that theater, without reliance on the mainland of the United States for support. All U.S. strategic planning is based upon those considerations: time in position, scheduled maintenance, and early warning systems that include electronic intelligence and intercept, and anti-submarine warfare.

Subic Bay is perhaps the most defensible natural deep water harbor in the world. It is surrounded by a natural fortification of hills. Saipan and Guam, on the other hand, are simply flat islands which would be finished off with just one or two ICBMs. Australia is too far away to even be considered as a serious alternative.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii cannot be competently considered as an alternative either. It cannot handle U.S. submarine capabilities, either from an Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) or a communications standpoint. Moreover, the repair facilities for U.S. Trident submarines, if Subic Bay were lost, would be pushed all the way back to Bremerton, Washington.

Along with Hokkaido, Japan, Subic Bay functions as a critical choke-point against a Soviet naval breakout from Vladivostok and Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Looking at the map of Southeast Asia, Subic Bay is directly opposite the Soviet naval facility at Cam Ranh Bay, nearly 600 statute miles, or 1½ hours by jet. The Soviet build-up at Cam Ranh Bay and DaNang Air Base, (both former U.S. facilities) represents the first time that the Soviets have managed to acquire this kind of capability.

In effect, if Hokkaido and Subic Bay were taken out of the strategic picture, from a strictly military standpoint, the United States would have no defensible position. Those inane Kissingerites who believe that the People's Republic of China could fulfill a strategic role against the Soviet Union are living out a pipedream. The recent multi-billion-dollar trade agreement signed by Moscow and Beijing takes tremendous pressure off the Soviet Union's transportation problems, by providing the Soviets with needed food supplies for Siberian development. The so-called China Card, when it comes down to strategic military realities, does not exist. It is a historic

irony that Taiwan, the last U.S. strategic ally to have been undercut, although it had committed itself to the defense of the Pacific rim, is for all intents and purposes left out in the cold.

To complete the strategic picture, it is necessary to provide an overview of recent developments within the Philippine military. According to members of both the Armed Forces and of the young officers' reform movement "We Belong," what is presently lacking in the Army is an *esprit de corps* and proper equipment to handle the communist insurgency. However, that program could only work under normal economic conditions, in which transportation and other infrastructure and large-scale projects with Army Corps of Engineer participation were being developed.

The danger in the situation is the manner in which the State Department and U.S. Congress have tied the Filipinos' hands, by supporting the hideous conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund. The simple counterinsurgency techniques of the past cannot work under the present economic circumstances, and the inclination of certain U.S. military circles to see the corruption in the military as the primary problem, is the sure road to making the same mistake the United States made in Vietnam.

The clearest focus of the volatile situation is the case of Gen. Fabian Ver, who is accused of complicity in the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino. In all probability, Ver will be acquitted and Marcos will reinstate him as Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces for a certain period of time. How long remains to be seen. Should this move by Marcos become a *casus belli*, leading certain elements of the "We Belong" reform movement to launch a more vigorous move against Marcos, then the Philippines may be on the verge of civil war. Given the way in which the U.S. State and Defense Departments have mishandled the situation with Acting Chief of Staff, General Ramos (see article, page 26), the situation could become disastrous.

Unless some of the U.S. assistance programs, with essentially no strings attached, are implemented, the situation in the Filipino military will become even more politicized and volatile. Secondly, the International Monetary Fund, the major factor destabilizing the Philippines economy, must be forced out of the country. The United States must adopt a policy of working with both the Philippines and the other ASEAN countries, whose security rests on their economic development, to carry out the development projects that will unleash the great economic potential of the region.

Short of that, social forces are being activated in this Philippines which could lead to an uncontrolled situation like that which developed in Iran, where the United States backed the so-called reformist elements of the military and the moderate politicians collapsed, leading to the destruction of the nation under Ayatollah Khomeini. Allowing the same individuals who overthrew the Shah the same opportunity in the Philippines, could only spell disaster and change the strategic situation decisively in favor of the Soviet imperial gameplan.