

Manila stirs up debate on U.S. bases

by Linda de Hoyos

When he was in the Philippines Congress, Raul Manglapus went on record in opposition to the presence of the U.S. strategic bases at Clark Field and Subic Bay. Now, as foreign secretary in the government of Corazon Aquino, Manglapus has, officially at least, changed his tune in parallel with Aquino's position of "keeping all options open."

The bases lease agreement comes up for renewal in 1991. Situated directly adjacent to the Soviet bases at Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, the U.S. bases at Clark and Subic are the only counterweight to the expanding Soviet presence in the Pacific. To remove the bases—to Palau or Guam, as the State Department has unofficially recommended—would leave the South China Sea to full Soviet control and cut the allied strategic supply line from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

The Philippines left, including Manglapus himself who spent 10 years of exile in the United States, sees the bases as unnecessary, given their delusion that the Soviet Union poses no security threat. Even for many Filipinos who see the U.S.S.R. as a threat, the fact that the United States pays the Philippines one-third the amount it pays Spain and Turkey for its bases, is an affront to national sovereignty. When pressed on this issue last July, Secretary of State George Shultz had told the Aquino government that if it demanded more money for the bases, the U.S. would simply pack up and leave.

To relieve Manila of the full burden of decision on the bases, Manglapus has taken the issue to the rest of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)—Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Singapore—as a question of regional security. In two successive trips to the ASEAN capitals, Manglapus has solicited official positions on the bases' presence, and is looking to make the bases a major agenda item of the upcoming ASEAN heads of state summit in Manila in December.

So far, ASEAN has been less equivocal than Manila.

For the safety and security of the region, Thailand has long given importance to the U.S. bases in the Philippines, stated Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Saroj Chavanaviraj Nov. 11 after a visit from Manglapus to Bangkok. He said that Thailand has maintained all along that it is necessary to create a political and military counterbalance to the situation in Indochina. But when asked whether this means Thailand

supports the Philippine proposal that ASEAN officially back the bases, Saroj replied, "These are details which the ASEAN foreign ministers will have to decide."

In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew declared the next day, that the removal of the U.S. bases would threaten Asia's economic growth. "The underlying basis for growth since World War II, especially in Asia, has been the stability and security provided by the United States," he said. "For several decades to come, there is no other power that can maintain the balance against the increasing presence of the Soviet navy and air force in the Far East, now with the Soviet bases at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang."

In Kuala Lumpur, ASEAN leaders gathered together for seminars sponsored by the Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies, expressed their surprise that Manglapus was attempting to make the bases a regional issue. Nevertheless, Jusu Wanandi, director of Jakarta's Center for Strategic and International Studies and a member of the Indonesian Parliament, was quoted as saying, "If the Americans left, who would fill the gap? The Soviet Union? China? Japan? It could create a whole new balance of power in the region."

The regional debate has prompted Asian allied nations outside of ASEAN also to take a position on the bases. Speaking in Singapore, Australian Defense Minister Kim Beazley, who has otherwise been unconcerned with the Soviet threat to Asia, declared that "the Philippines makes a significant contribution to regional security by hosting the major U.S. military presence." He affirmed Australia's "strong support" for the bases, warning: "The increased Soviet military presence at Cam Ranh Bay . . . does not enhance a sense of security among the states of the region and serves no purpose they regard as valuable."

The Japanese have also come out for the bases, since the July ASEAN foreign ministers summit. In Manila Nov. 15, Zentaro Osaka, a former foreign minister, told President Aquino the removal of the bases "would not be healthy to the balance of power in Southeast Asia."

As he was launching the bases debate in the region, Manglapus reaffirmed Nov. 10 that the Philippines is likely to invoke the anti-nuclear clauses in its Aquino-devised Constitution and ban nuclear weapons or nuclear-fueled ships from Subic and Clark. The clauses are similar to those imposed by New Zealand against the United States in 1985, which resulted in the break-up of the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and U.S.) treaty.

If Manglapus appears to be seeking regional support in keeping the bases, he is also acquiring regional support to keep the Philippines "nuclear free"—a move that will fuel the Soviet drive, backed now only by Indonesia, for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in Southeast Asia. This is Soviet "diplomatese" for the breaking of the U.S. security alliance with ASEAN and the final withdrawal of the United States from the region.