

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Will Senate scuttle Philippines bases?

Former National Security Adviser Gen. Brent Scowcroft led a panel of Council on Foreign Relations experts here June 1 to release a new report on prospects for the United States keeping its strategically vital naval and air bases in the Philippines beyond 1991, when the current agreement for use of the facilities expires.

However, the study, entitled "The Philippine Bases: Negotiating the Future," totally ignores the current instability in Manila.

This was reflected in exclusive remarks by Scowcroft to this reporter following the panel. In fact, Scowcroft said he expected more trouble from the U.S. Senate, if it has to ratify a new treaty with the Philippines for continued use of the Subic Bay naval station and Clark Air Field, than from political opposition inside the Philippines itself.

"The Senate may decide it doesn't want to agree to the terms that the Philippines will ask for in order to have the use of the facilities extended," Scowcroft told me. "This could be our biggest problem if, in fact, the Filipinos insist that the new agreement take the form of a treaty, thus requiring ratification by the U.S. Senate."

Scowcroft said he is "cautiously optimistic" that a new agreement keeping the U.S. military forces in the Philippines will be worked out before

the current agreement expires in 1991, but none of his reasoning took into account the problems that currently face the Aquino regime there.

Scowcroft said that the Aquino government, as those of the ASEAN nations, will want the continued presence of the U.S. militarily to counter the growing influence of the Soviet Navy. With the huge buildup of Soviet naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, the Soviets are now a major threat in the Pacific. Their Cam Ranh Bay base of operations covers the key sea lanes both for Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean.

But Scowcroft also spouted the contradictory line that the Soviets have somehow dropped their interest in gaining strategic footholds in the Third World. He told me that the Soviets have grown weary of struggles in Africa, for example, which have cost them billions with nothing to show for it (a disputed point, indeed).

For this reason, apparently, he did not respond when this reporter asked during the panel discussions whether Soviet low-intensity warfare methods are having an effect in turning the public against the U.S. presence in the Philippines.

Scowcroft winced, but did not comment as Fred Greene, editor of the CFR's study, answered that he did not think there was any Soviet role of consequence operating in the Philippines now, and that any opposition to U.S. military presence is due only to "ultra-nationalistic" impulses. Greene said that polls show over 80% of the Filipino population supports the U.S. presence, a reflection of the fact the U.S. is the second-largest employer and provides for about 5% of the GNP.

While he noted that the 20% who are opposed are "intense and eloquent" with "good access to the media, especially in the Manila area," he declined to concede there was any So-

viet role, or, indeed, any fear of serious destabilization of the Aquino government in store.

Therefore, the entire CFR study is based on wishful thinking. Remarkably, Scowcroft told me he feels the Soviets have given up even the idea of using proxies for gaining ground in the Third World.

The obvious contradiction in his assessment was clear when he admitted that the Soviets might look at Southeast Asia as a "different kettle of fish" than, say, Africa.

He did not mince words when asked about the consequences of a U.S. pullout from the Philippines, noting that the next best thing the U.S. could do would be to build up new naval facilities at Guam or in the Mariana Islands, 2,000 miles from the forward basing position now held at Subic Bay.

He also cautioned against any idea that, in the environment of the "new détente," mutual withdrawal of the Soviets from Cam Ranh Bay and the U.S. from Subic Bay would be equitable. "If I were a Soviet, there is nothing I would be more in favor of than such a trade-off," he said. "It would leave the Soviets with a huge advantage. They have other access to those critical sea lanes in the area. If we pulled out of Subic Bay, we would be thousands of miles away."

So, on the one hand, no serious attention is given to the instability in the Philippines, due largely to the ability of Soviet low-intensity operations to exploit the continued economic backwardness of the country. But on the other hand, a warning is given of the Soviets' strategic naval buildup in the region.

The tragedy is that fiscal austerity policies—International Monetary Fund debt collection on the one hand, and deep cuts in the U.S. defense budget on the other hand—are the cause of this inconsistency.