

Southeast Asia Rejects Australia Strike Policy

by Mike Billington

U.S. Deputy Sheriff-wannabe John Howard, otherwise serving as the Prime Minister of Australia, triggered a firestorm of protest among his Asian neighbors with his Dec. 1 televised call for the modification of the UN Charter to allow pre-emptive attacks against terrorists in other nations.

Howard's Defense Minister, Robert Hill, first enunciated the policy on Nov. 29, in a speech at the University of Adelaide. "In these days of unconventional conflict, global terrorism, [and] weapons of mass destruction," said Hill, "the definition of self-defense, I think, needs to be looked at again in terms of that reality, [rather] than some reality that existed 50 years ago. Some would argue that it's time for a new and distinct doctrine of pre-emptive action to avert a threat." Howard then declared his agreement, stating that "if you believe that somebody was going to launch an attack" against the country from foreign territory, "either of a conventional kind or a terrorist kind," that would justify a pre-emptive attack.

No one missed the fact that the Howard government was once again tailing after the most extreme war faction within the Bush Administration, with its strategic doctrine of pre-emptive assault against perceived terrorists wherever they may be, national sovereignty be damned.

The response from Australia's Asian neighbors was immediate and blunt. As usual, Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was the most direct: "If anyone tries to carry out his laws within our borders, then we will consider that an act of aggression, and we will take action under our laws," Dr. Mahathir told reporters. "There are many countries in East Asia, all of which are Asian countries. This country stands out like a sore thumb trying to impose its European values on Asia. It is as if this is still the good old days when people could shoot aborigines without caring about human rights, etc. These are the people who talk about human rights. Actually, for them anything goes, including assassination."

Malaysia's semi-official *New Straits Times* called Howard "Uncle Sam's foremost flunky," and asked if the United States or Australia would be "killing *à la* the Hellfire extermination of al-Qaeda in Yemen, in, perhaps, Indonesia or Malaysia."

Indonesia, which has offered Australia full cooperation in investigating the Oct. 12 bombing in Bali, in which nearly half the victims were Australian tourists, could not ignore a threat which was clearly aimed first and foremost at them.

Gen. Endriartono Sutarto, the head of the military, following a Cabinet meeting with President Megawati Sukarnoputri, said that Indonesia "would not stand by and watch while a foreign nation attacked Indonesia under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Such an action is an act of aggression against another sovereign country, and we will not stand by, should they attack."

Even in the Philippines, which has allowed the United States to deploy troops into combat situations within its territory against Islamic separatists in the South, protested. Foreign Secretary Blas Ople called Howard's remarks "very hasty, exuberant, and somewhat bizarre"; National Security Adviser Roilo Golez called them "arrogant," and reminded Howard that "this is the 21st Century, not the 19th." Golez warned that Manila will now "go slow" on a proposed anti-terror pact with Australia. And Sen. Ralph Recto said of Howard: "He is not a Crocodile Dundee who can treat the whole of Asia as an extension of the Australian outback. . . . No country will ever issue a hunting permit to Australian forces. Asia is not a place where Howard can go on safari."

The U.S. Side

At the Dec. 2 White House press briefing, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was asked about Howard's policy, and whether President Bush supported "the use of pre-emptive military action against terrorists in Asia." Fleischer answered: "The President of course supports pre-emptive action. . . . Sept. 11 changed everything, and nations must respond and change their doctrines to face new and different threats. That's the way of the world. It always has been."

The journalist then asked: "So it's a universal principle, that all nations are encouraged or entitled to rethink that position, and all nations are entitled to take a pre-emptive view?" Fleischer concurred.

Although the war faction within the Bush Administration has been temporarily restrained in regard to Iraq, there are signs that they are escalating their confrontational policies in Asia. On Dec. 4, the *Philippines Inquirer* was leaked a secret plan being worked out between the United States and the Philippines, to establish a "rapid deployment force" of Filipino soldiers, whose tasks would include: "to respond quickly to small-scale crises within the Philippines, act as Manila's designated force for UN operations, and contribute to any regional and international military response to crisis."

This call for a "rapid deployment force" is not unique to Asia—U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has called for a similar arrangement for Ibero-America. Such a force has a particularly nasty smell in Asia, however, where memories of colonial wars, fought with "native soldiers" enforcing colonial policies against their countrymen or other nations, are far from extinguished in the minds of senior leaders. The response to the proposal will likely be similar to that extended to "U.S. Deputy Sheriff" Howard's pre-emptive strike policy.