

**Critical Comment on the US-Australian Alliance
and its impact on the Philippines and Southeast Asia**

By Dr. Carolina P. Araullo

Vice-Chairperson, BAYAN-Philippines

Vice-Chairperson, International League for People's Struggle-Philippine Chapter^{*}

Last December, before the outbreak of the US invasion of Iraq, Australian PM Howard issued a statement invoking Australia's "right to first strike". Actually, what he said was that international law needed to be redrafted so that the concept of self-defense could embrace first strikes against terrorists in foreign countries without UN approval.

While it came as a surprise, it was not met with the same uproar or widespread condemnation as Bush' statements on the US right to first strike, regime change and similar unilateral actions that disregard if not violate international law.

Truly, Australia can not be compared or likened to the US behemoth. It is not an imperialist power, it has not engaged in military adventures, etc. It was also only last January when Australian foreign minister Downer said that military intervention in the Solomons would be "folly in the extreme".

Yet here we are gathered now seriously discussing the roots, the implications and the possible consequences of the Howard government's unmistakable and alarming drift towards a policy of political repression, fascism and racism at home and military intervention and aggression overseas.

We in the Philippines are seriously concerned by this development because of Australia's solid record not only of silently toeing US foreign policy in the region, including its support for the Marcos dictatorship in the 70s and 80s, but also its equally low key but no less pernicious role of backing up the repressive and anti-people US and Philippine apparatus in terms of providing intelligence, databanking and training.

It is this role, clearly, which the US, Australia and Philippine governments are collaborating on now to upgrade and expand under the guise of "anti-terrorism" and "counterterrorism"; the former, with a more wide-ranging scope including political and social measures, while the latter refers to military actions.

It is becoming clear to most people in my country, as it is generally accepted in most countries everywhere except perhaps the US, that the so-called "war against terror" is nothing but a pretext for the US expansion and consolidation of its post-Cold War hegemony in accordance with the "Project New American Century" crafted by Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, et al.

^{*}Spoken at Now We the People Conference, "Challenging the US Empire – Australia for peace and justice", August 23-24, 2003, University of Technology, Sydney

We need only cite the US pretexts versus actual goals in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. That is, in Afghanistan, the alleged need to go after the arch-terrorist Osama bin Laden who was being given sanctuary by the extremely oppressive Taliban regime versus the desire of the US to control the oil pipelines from the Caspian as well as control of Central Asia which constitutes the left flank of China. In Iraq, the need to destroy WMDs threatening the US and the entire world as well as overthrow Saddam Hussein versus oil resources and tighter control over entire Middle East.

Southeast Asia and the Philippines has been declared by no less than Bush as the “second front” after Afghanistan. *Balikatan* 02-01 and other military exercises plus the Mutual Logistical Support Agreement (MLSA), an access agreement between the US and the Philippines, has been used to increase and upgrade US military presence (what the US military loves to call “maintaining a robust military presence” in the area.) US strategy papers cite the strategic importance of South East Asia (SEA) and the Philippines (half of world trade worth \$500B passes through SEA waters) and need for US to “secure” the area “in the interest of peace and freedom” (read: US economic and geopolitical interests.)

US national security and US strategy in SEA and the Pacific also cite the role of Australia as a long-term reliable ally and partner of the US in the region. Now, Australia has been given the responsibility of ensuring and maintaining the security of the region against all forms of terrorist threats and attacks.

All these recent events indicate that the US and its allies in the so-called “war against terror” are steamrolling through their plans and achieving their objectives, in the process violating international law, undermining the United Nations, foisting political repression and violating human and peoples’ rights with impunity.

But a closer look reveals that they cannot do pretty much as they please. For all its claims to and assertions of its right to act unilaterally, the US has not once been able to do so. It has opted to ignore the UN Charter but only at the expense of isolating itself politically worldwide. It is compelled everywhere to continue relying on its allies (NATO, Japan, Australia, Philippines) and building coalitions (“coalition of the willing”) to back up its adventures. This is not only for political but also for economic or financial reasons. The US may be the wealthiest nation, but its resources are finite and its economy continues to be stagnant, recession-prone and in crisis. The US needs to have allies to share not only the bill but also in the political backlash from casualties and body bags.

The US totally underestimated Iraqi resistance and for that matter world opposition to its “war on terror”. Even among the American people, the groundswell of support arising from the sympathy and outrage over the 9-11 bombings is eroding over time as the Bush-led US “war on terror” is unmasked as the bigger and more destructive “super-terror”.

It is important for those of us who dare to stand up to this state-sponsored terror to clearly see its two sides: the destruction it can wreak with its seeming awesome and overwhelming power, as well as its weaknesses and limitations in pursuing its evil

designs. Knowing the destruction it seeks to bring upon the world gives us the moral basis and impetus to fight it with all the means we have and in all arenas we can. Knowing its objective weaknesses gives us the strength and confidence-- the objective basis for our optimism -- that it can be defeated. Knowing both underscores for us the need to muster and unite all the forces the world over against this imperial monster.