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# Policy Notes

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## The AFP's institutional responses to armed conflict: a continuing quest for the right approach

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*Freedom. Your Right. Our Responsibility.*  
- Current slogan of the Armed Forces  
of the Philippines

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as an institution is tasked to defend the country against internal and external threats. The organization takes pride in fulfilling its role as the “guardian of democracy” and “protector of the people and the state” against forces that threaten the people’s freedom. But how does the AFP do this role? How does it respond as an institution to the armed conflict between the government and its enemies?

This *Notes* looks at the various operation plans or OPLANS that the military designed and implemented against the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA),

Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) under the presidencies of Ferdinand Marcos, Corazon Aquino, Fidel V. Ramos, Joseph Estrada and currently, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. It analyzes the peace policies of the government using as a framework the study of a senior United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) official<sup>1</sup> and assesses the military’s institutional responses to the armed conflict—where they failed, where they succeeded, and why. It also makes recommendations for policy intervention to enhance the process for sustainable peace,

<sup>1</sup> Paper entitled “Mindanao and beyond: competing policies, protracted conflict and human security” (2002) written by Dr. Paul Oquist, UNDP Senior Regional Governance Adviser for Asia and Coordinator of the UNDP Paragon Regional Governance Programme for Asia.

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human security, and human development in the Philippines.

### Framework for analysis

In his paper written in 2002, UNDP's Dr. Paul Oquist observed that the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) has used three competing policy positions in trying to address the armed conflict, which partly explains the extreme protraction of the peace process in Mindanao.

These three policy positions are:

**Pacification position** – seeks a cessation of hostilities while making as few concessions as possible. The results are usually short-term and do not sufficiently address the root causes of armed conflicts since none of the actors have the political will/capacity to solve the causes and construct long-term peace.

**Victory position** – seeks the immediate end of armed conflicts and the defeat of insurgency groups. This is usually accompanied by large-scale military operations that use highly repressive tactics that violate human rights. It is able to make small insurgencies large and protracted, and is self-destructive.

**Institutional position** – advocates the adoption and implementation of policies necessary to achieve sustainable, long-term peace and the articulation of institutions to implement and consolidate these policies.

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### The AFP's institutional responses

The government's responses to the armed conflict has been a compromise between civilian and military interpretations and perception of armed threats and how best to respond to them. This tension between civilian and military authorities is reflected in the mix of government and military responses to these threats as seen in the right hand and left hand approaches to counterinsurgency from the 1950s onwards. The balance between the right hand (primarily the use of military force) and left hand (socio-economic and political measures to address root causes and win hearts and minds of the people) tilted in favor of one side, depending on the overall political, economic, social, and environmental context, the strategic situation on the ground, and on the personality and policy preferences of political and military leaders. It does not help that the military is generally averse to peace agreements and amnesty for insurgents because of the loss of military lives and the personal sacrifices of soldiers to make the country safe against its enemies. From the perspective of the men and women in uniform in general, armed conflicts should be settled first before national development could prosper.

The series of operational plans implemented by the military from the time of the Marcos dictatorship to the present reflects this view.

### OPLANS of the AFP

#### *Marcos regime: martial law era*

When Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, he needed the military to rule the country. He then expanded the AFP's role in society and politics by making it a partner in national development. Military officers were trained in various social science fields like public administration and business management to prepare them to manage society and government—a task they performed during martial law. Marcos

also put all the uniformed services under his control through the AFP Chief of Staff: the Army, Air Force, Navy, and the Constabulary-Integrated National Police.

It was during this period that the growth of the communist insurgency and Muslim separatism was nurtured. From about 1,100 in 1971 with an armed component of 310, the CPP-NPA grew to 7,200 members with a mass base of 480,000 by 1983. On the other hand, Nur Misuari's MNLF and Bangsa Moro Army numbered about 16,700 in 1973. By the mid-1970s, however, the MNLF has become the biggest threat to national security. Attacks were made in Marawi City shortly after martial law was declared and Muslim separatism spread to other parts of the Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan region. By 1975, 75 percent of AFP troops were deployed in Mindanao and the AFP's budget increased by 700 percent from P518 million in 1972 to P3.5 billion in 1976.

In response to the MNLF threat, OPLAN *Bagong Buhay*, a 5-year phase strategy combining the victory and institutional positions was adopted. Under the plan, the military conducted offensive operations against the MNLF while civilian agencies sought to reestablish civil authority by restructuring local governments, reopening schools, strengthening the police forces, and reconstructing recovered infrastructure facilities to uplift the economic condition of the people.

The toll on human lives and property was heavy on both sides. Independent estimates came out with these numbers: 50,000 deaths, 2 million refugees, 200,000 houses burned, 535 mosques and 200 schools demolished, and 35 cities and towns destroyed. Still, the military operations managed to reduce the MNLF forces from 16,900 to 6,900 in 1976. As a result, the MNLF was forced to the negotiation table. Thus, the victory position enabled the achievement of the

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pacification goal of a peace agreement. However, the conflicting policy positions were ultimately unsuccessful: the triumph of military might (victory position) was short-lived and the failure in the implementation of the institutional position enabled the Muslim separatist movement to persist and outlive martial law.

In the same manner, the institutional response to the CPP-NPA consisted of the right hand (victory position) and left hand (institutional position) approaches. The military conducted operations that led to the communists' loss of more than 10,000 combatants, the capture of almost 2,000 leaders, and recovery of more than 2,000 firearms. At the same time, the AFP's Home Defense Program carried out literacy projects and livelihood programs that benefited 246,000 people from 1973-1978. These programs eventually led to a radical decline in the NPA's mass base—from 65,000 to 20,000 during that period. Clearly, an indication of the institutional position's advantage over the victory and pacification positions.

While the right hand and left hand tactic worked for a brief period, the insurgency was not resolved and eventually resurged and spread to other parts of Luzon, in particular, the Bicol region, Visayas, and some parts of Mindanao. Because of this, OPLAN *Katatagan* was adopted in 1981. It was implemented in four stages: clearing, holding, consolidation, and development of areas recovered from insurgents. It also involved the police, paramili-

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tary forces through the strengthened Civil Home Defense Forces (CHDF), civilian voluntary organizations, and local development agencies in achieving the security-development design of the plan. Though correctly premised on the fact that the insurgency is caused by social inequalities and other ills in society, OPLAN *Katatagan's* goal, however, was still to defend the state instead of securing and caring for the people. There were also problems of inefficiency as the use of AFP resources was not maximized and there was a lack of appreciation of the root causes of the insurgency problem. Thus, the military's conflicting policies in dealing with the communist insurgency, like the Muslim separatism, survived the Marcos regime.

#### *Aquino administration: 1986-1992*

With the entry of Corazon Aquino's administration, there was an initial attempt to restore the pre-martial law balance of power between the civilian authority and the military. Its principal policy in relation to armed conflict was one of reconciliation with justice. In April 1986, therefore, the AFP replaced OPLAN *Katatagan* with OPLAN *Mamamayan*. Instead of protecting the security of the state, *Mamamayan* focused on protecting the people. It also added the new administration's mantra of national reconciliation with justice. But because the defense and military establishment opposed the policy and sought a tougher stance against the communist insurgency and Muslim separatists,

a counterinsurgency strategy was formulated that basically retained the right hand and left hand approaches of the past. The victory position was reflected in the establishment of Special Operations Teams (SOTs) that had three teams undertaking psychological, security, and "stay-behind" operations. The psy-ops team sought to discover guerilla political organizations and structure, the security team handled the safety of captured rebels while the third team took care of barangay defense. The reconstituted Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGUs), the successor to the CHDF during martial law, also bolstered the military capacity. On the other hand, *Mamamayan* also encouraged rebels to return to the fold of the law together with their firearms and instituted rehabilitation programs for the surrenderees. In exchange, they were extended loans to start a new life. These goals represented the institutional policy position.

In the end, *Mamamayan* also failed to solve the communist insurgency and was replaced by OPLAN *Lambat Bitag* in September 1988. A further refinement of its predecessors, *Lambat Bitag's* long-term goal was to end the insurgency by addressing its political, economic, and social causes. But its immediate aim was to "slash its growth through military means" which demonstrates the "unsheathing of the sword of war," a sign of the influence of the military in Aquino's policy regarding the insurgency.

The two goals also indicate the continuing incoherent policy of the military in response to armed conflict. While *Lambat Bitag's* guidelines included waging a war of rapid conclusion by prioritizing and destroying guerilla fronts through simultaneous military offensives countrywide, it also invoked the strict observance of human rights, abiding with the national reconciliation policy, involving civic and local government officials and mobilizing various sectors like labor, peasantry, clergy, media, etc.

The plan was more successful than *Mamamayan* as it managed to diminish the communist strength from 25,200 in 1987 to 14,800 in 1991. Rebel firearms were likewise cut from 12,060 in 1989 to 10,510 in 1991. Similar reductions were also noted in infiltrated barangays and guerilla fronts. Furthermore, seven high-ranking communist leaders were captured in 1988 including CPP-NPA secretary-general Rafael Baylosis and NPA chief Romulo Kintanar. In spite of this, the communist insurgency survived.

#### *Ramos administration: 1992-1998*

When Fidel V. Ramos assumed the presidency, his policy was to forge peace agreements with all armed groups. Aware of the importance of having an enabling environment for economic recovery and growth, he pursued the policy of national reconciliation and set up the mechanisms that led to the adoption of the National Program for Unification and Development in 1994 which offered amnesty to the leftists, separatists, and rightists. The peace strategy under Ramos consisted primarily of economic, political and social reforms, consensus building, and negotiations with the rebels. This represented the institutional position.

Significantly, the government also repealed R.A. 1700, the Anti-subversion Law, paving the way for the former subversive groups to pursue their political and social goals through parliamentary rather than armed struggle. The peace talks with the CPP-NPA, however, did not go far because of the left's insistence of being accorded the status of parity with the GRP.

*Lambat Bitag* remained in force. But gains were made in the *Balik-Baril* program which encouraged rebels to surrender their firearms in exchange for seed money to start a livelihood program. The success of this program further diminished the mass base of the communist insurgency as the number of infiltrated

barangays dropped from 8,496 in 1988 to just 984 by 1993. Further reduction in the coming years enabled the government to scale down the AFP's role in counterinsurgency to a supporting role while the internal security task was transferred to the Philippine National Police (PNP) except in Mindanao, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Bicol Region, southeastern Quezon, and the Cordillera Administrative Region. Having learned from the Marcos regime, civil-military operations during the Ramos presidency were more holistic and developmental in nature as they became integrated into the Social Reform Agenda. As a result, 236 Muslim rebels surrendered and gave up 188 firearms in 1998.

The road to peace that started in 1986 has been rocky but some achievements were still made. The peace talks with the MNLF eventually led to a ceasefire and the signing of a peace agreement in September 1996. The Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) was established, selected Bangsa Moro Army members were integrated into the AFP and Nur Misuari was elected Governor of the ARMM and Chair of the SPCPD. The splinter group, MILF, also engaged in peace talks with the GRP in 1997.

#### *Estrada administration: 1998-2001*

The gains made in the peace negotiations with Muslim secessionists, however, were drastically affected with Joseph Estrada's mailed fist policy.

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After the MILF rejected his ultimatum for a peace agreement, Estrada, with the advice and support of the military, declared an “all-out war” against the MILF in Central Mindanao in April 2000. This signaled a distinct policy shift from Ramos’s negotiated settlement, a policy much influenced by the AFP leadership. Meanwhile, peace talks with the communist insurgents stalled due to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), to which the NDF objected. Aware of the split within the communist movement, Estrada sought peace talks with the communist factions opposing the NDF. In the end, Estrada’s three-year term was marked by an increase in strength of both the communist insurgency and Muslim secessionism. His administration’s failure to address the root causes of the armed conflict and focus on the victory position helped keep the armed conflict alive.

*Macapagal-Arroyo administration: 2001 to present*

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s administration has pursued a negotiated settlement both with the communist insurgents and Muslim separatists: in 2002, the military launched OPLAN *Bantay Laya*, a five-year counterinsurgency program involving both the military and civilian agencies of the government. Its strategic goal “is to decisively defeat the insurgents’ armed groups in order to obtain and maintain peace for national development.” This goal reflects the victory and institutional positions, with the logic that victory is necessary for national development to take place.

*Bantay Laya* is based on the National Internal Security Plan (NISP) formulated by the Department of National Defense (DND) and developed and adopted by the AFP. The immediate goal of the plan is to defeat the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), stop the growth of the CPP-NPA, and contain the Southern Philippines Separatist Groups (SPSG referring to the MNLF, the Misuari Breakaway Group, and the MILF). It

also aims to reduce the CPP-NPA affected areas, manpower, and firearms and to degrade the capability of the SPSGs. Among its long-term goals are to prevent the resurgence of the ASG, resolve the CPP-NPA threat, and compel the SPSGs to renounce their separatist objective.

*Bantay Laya’s* operational principle consists of clear, hold, and support methodology. The clear phase involves the conduct of combat, intelligence, and psychological (the so-called triad concept) operations to militarily defeat the insurgents. The hold phase entails limiting the movement, resources, and mass base support of the insurgents and preventing their incursion in the barangays to protect the people, defend communities, and secure vital installations. The support phase is divided into subphases where consolidation and development activities would be undertaken by civilian agencies. In the past OPLANS, the military found itself performing the development responsibilities of civilian agencies for which the AFP had no training. With *Bantay Laya’s* modified methodology, the AFP’s role is to strengthen government control over contested barangays, help develop LGUs’ capability during consolidation, and play a supportive role to civilian agencies during development subphases.

The *Bantay Laya* pursues the institutional policy position premised on a prior attainment of victory against the insurgents. The continuing lack of policy coherence explains the prevailing uncertain state of the peace process with the NDF and MILF. Consequently, this policy incoherence also led to the persistence of “a distant peace” for the country.

**Toward a policy coherence in the peace process**

The failure of the succession of operational plans against the communist insurgency and Muslim secessionism since the Marcos admin-

istration could be traced to the lack of policy coherence. The jumbled mixture of pacification, victory, and institutional positions is manifested in the failure of the various agencies that are supposed to implement components of the plans to coordinate their activities. In many instances, the civilian agencies had relied too much on the AFP to carry out their assigned tasks. Moreover, the actors that signed the peace agreement were not the same ones who funded and implemented it. In the same vein, the implementation of the right hand and left hand approach did not have the necessary coordination between the military and civilians to ensure effectiveness. Both the military and civilian actors have their own framework, language, and statistics. The military continued to view insurgents as “enemies” or “pests” while the civilian agencies were lax in taking over from the military of their supposed tasks.

The current *Bantay Laya* plan is supposed to address some of these problems. It identified the responsibilities of the DND/AFP, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG)/PNP, and the main civilian government agencies in charge of implementing the various phases of the plan. Furthermore, the Arroyo administration established a National Task Force on Convergence Strategy to develop and adopt a common framework and language for the peace process to harmonize the right and left hand approaches in dealing with the armed conflict. This common framework could resolve the problem of policy incoherence. However, there is a need to develop a culture of peace among the stakeholders, starting with the military whose mindset has been traditionally set by its mission.

### Recommendations

- In order to avoid policy incoherence, the government must have a clear choice of which option to take. Since pacification and victory positions have clearly failed judging from the

continuing armed conflict, the preferred option would be institutional policy because it addresses the root causes of the conflict, is holistic and inclusive of stakeholders, and puts a high value on institutions and processes.

- The government must adopt a human security framework as a necessary component of its policy to redress armed conflict rather than adopting a state or regime security approach.
- Those who negotiate and forge peace agreements should also finance and implement them in order to achieve the need for consistency. The peace process should also be under a civilian leader with integrity, probity, independence, and competence and someone who can mobilize all sectors behind the peace process.
- The government must undertake measures that would make it harder to gain from armed conflict. Some established groups might be profiting from the conflict and would not genuinely seek its resolution.
- There is a need for greater civil society involvement in the peace process. They can serve as independent and nonpartisan monitors to ensure that the process is on track and provide timely and accurate information about the situation on the ground.
- All stakeholders should support the efforts and output of the National Task Force on Con-

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vergence Strategy. The Task Force seeks to harmonize the right and left hand approaches to armed conflicts and craft a common framework among the stakeholders in and out of government and in the military.

- The military needs to be more effectively subordinated to civilian authority so that its members do not undermine the policy option chosen by the government. In addition, the

military must swiftly and effectively impose penalty for military insubordination.

- Finally, politicians and other civilian leaders need to understand the dynamics and context of the institutionalization of the supremacy of civilian authority. Oversight functions must ensure that the institution that they seek to subordinate does not get destroyed in the process.



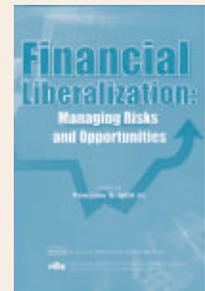
### New book

#### Financial liberalization: managing risks and opportunities

*edited by Ponciano S. Intal Jr.*

This volume, which is co-published with the Philippine APEC Study Center Network (PASCN), is a collection of seven studies that focus on interrelated aspects of the structural and institutional foundations of effective risk management and exploitation of opportunities in an open economy. It also draws lessons from and insights on macroeconomic management in an open economy; the liberalization of the banking industry; the human resource implications of financial liberalization and integration; and the behavior of APEC member-economies toward the financial services agreement under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

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