

Review Essay

Behind and Beyond the Bases Negotiations

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A Matter of Honor: The Story of the 1990-91 RP-US Bases Talks. BY ALFREDO BENZON. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc, 1997.

WAS Cory Aquino, who confused us all by her 'options open' policy, for a withdrawal or for an extension of the stay of the United States (US) military bases and forces during the 1990-91 Philippine-American Cooperation Talks?

As President Aquino's 'pointman' and as vice chair of the Philippine bases panel that negotiated the proposed bases treaty, the former Secretary of Health, Dr Alfredo 'Alran' Bengzon, has written an important insider's account of how the US bullied and bamboozled the Philippine government panel into accepting an onerous bases treaty.

Bengzon's book, *A Matter of Honor*, will be remembered for what ultimately went right (for the Philippines) after the smoke had cleared, as well as what went wrong (for US strategic interests). Its significance lies in the perspective it

provides, that of a key member of the Philippine panel. It is an excellent and frank supplement to former Senate President Jovito Salonga's *The Senate That Said No* (UP Press, 1995).

Bengzon reveals that Cory Aquino's—as well as the Philippine panel's—original position and framework in the negotiation was for a seven-year treaty of phaseout withdrawal—no more and no less. Had that position been accepted by the US panel headed by Richard Armitage, it might have resulted in the removal of the US bases only this year (1998) and not earlier, in 1991. It was viewed then by the Philippine panel as a fitting way of commemorating the centennial of Philippine independence. But on the negotiation scoreboard, the US got the most concessions, particularly on the contentious issues of duration and compensation.

TACTICAL ALLIANCES

Despite Bengzon's complaints about Armitage, who was just after all fully looking after the United States' strategic and military interests, it turns out that the number one ally of the anti-bases sena-

tors and anti-bases movement was not Alran Bengzon but Armitage.

Armitage's hardline position produced a treaty so one-sidedly in favor of the US that even the pro-bases Philippine negotiators became ashamed of it, thus assuring the defeat of the draft treaty in the Philippine Senate. The lopsided treaty sealed the alliance between the pro-bases but anti-treaty senators and the hardline anti-bases senators led by Wigberto Tañada.

Armitage's high-handed style was so extreme that he even tried to tell the Philippine government who should not sit in the Philippine panel, i.e. Bengzon.

Bengzon's detailed narration of the shabby treatment of the Philippines by American negotiators is instructive for those closely following the negotiations, now concluded, for an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and a Visiting Forces Agreement. The book narrates how the US bullies, not negotiates with, small nations like the Philippines, ignoring the latter's Constitution and always operating on the assumption that what must be good for Uncle Sam must definitely be good for all freedom-loving natives of the world.

The US negotiating panel thought it got what it wanted: a 10-year 'phasedown' with access plus the option of renewal after 10 years. But by being too greedy, the US lost precisely what it sought to gain: the retention of its military bases. The loss was suffered at the hands of a struggling, sovereign people and their Senate.

The US underestimated the post-EDSA (EDSA is the highway where the

People Power revolution of February 1986 took place.) Senate by thinking that, like the Philippine negotiating panel, it was merely grandstanding (as, in fact, a few were). It thought that resistance to US pressure merely consisted of opportunistic and vacillating Filipino politicians who would ultimately give way to its wishes. In the end, the Americans had the greatest shock of their lives when the Senate rejected the draft treaty.

MANEUVERINGS

But let us be clear about this: Bengzon tells us that the Philippine panel's (and Cory's) original position was really for a phaseout and an American withdrawal covering seven years. Was the 1990-91 Philippine bases panel involved in bases extension talks, or withdrawal talks?

Bengzon tells us the talks were about a withdrawal treaty that would end on the centennial year of our independence. The reality is that, based on the 1986 Constitution, any new treaty beyond 1991 would be a de facto treaty of extension. Effective bases withdrawal could only materialize if there was no treaty negotiated or ratified.

Throughout the book, Bengzon does not hesitate to fire stinging salvos against Philippine officials who he says, persistently and successfully undermined the Philippine panel's original framework. These officials included Ambassador Emmanuel Pelaez, National Security Adviser Rafael Ileteo, Finance Secretary Jesus Estanislao, Central Bank Governor Jose Cuisia and Executive Secretary Oscar Orbos, whose particular mischief lay in initiating 'backchanneling' talks with the US.

But what so shocked the author was not just these officials' behavior of acting as lobbyists for the US government, but their insistence on violating the 1986 Philippine Constitution, particularly its prohibition against nuclear weapons as well as the transitory provisions related to the holding of a referendum. These Filipino officials even proposed strategies that were in direct contravention of our Constitution.

While Bengzon deserves credit for his sense of 'honor' (or well-intentioned naivete), it must be pointed out that a 'soft treaty' pushed by the panel would have been more dangerous. It would have effectively outmaneuvered the anti-bases senators and, as such, would have been a de facto victory for the pro-bases people, as it would have allowed the incoming administration of Fidel Ramos to negotiate with the US on another so-called treaty of withdrawal.

The Philippine panel's position also tells us that Aquino was really pro-bases, despite Bengzon's contrary evaluation, because in the end, she told the Filipino people how strongly she felt about her stand by being the first president of an independent republic to march and lead a rally in support of the retention of foreign military troops and bases! At that very shameful moment, even Bengzon wanted to dissociate himself from the Cory Aquino government.

NATIONAL HONOR

But as events showed after the Senate's rejection of the proposed bases treaty, a real and effective position of bases withdrawal was best with no treaty in

place, because the mechanics of an effective withdrawal did not really require any treaty at all. Subic was effectively vacated after only one year from the termination and non-renewal of the treaty. And the dismantling of the bases merely proved the doomsayers wrong. Far from leading to the collapse of the country's economy, Subic, Clark and other areas uncovered a vast economic and commercial potential which now benefit some of the most avid supporters of the bases' retention. Despite its lapses and underestimation of continued US maneuverings, Bengzon's book is instructive for all Filipinos who are trying to live out the spirit of the centennial of our independence.

The US, as Bengzon says in his book, wants to use ambiguous language in its agreements so it can have room for its unilateral interpretation. Bengzon believes that after the rejection of the military bases agreement, US ships and troops visiting our country should be coming here on our terms and abiding by our rules and laws as befits a truly sovereign nation. In the preservation of the national honor, Bengzon's book fortifies the dictum: We are the masters of our fate. It is something to be remembered especially this year which is notable for two occasions: the centennial of independence and the national elections.

Can those aspiring to become leaders be counted upon to uphold the national honor which, throughout Philippine history, has been challenged not only in the negotiating table but in the drafting and enforcement of economic, social and political issues as well?