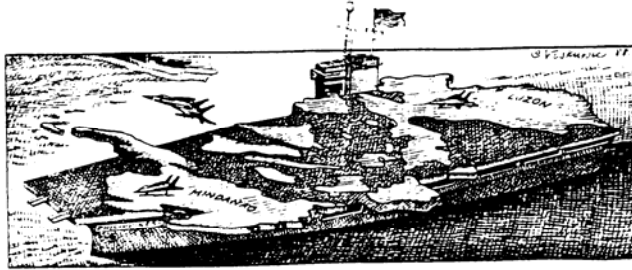


Subic and Nuclear War at Sea

by D. Boone Schirmer



IN THE FAR EASTERN Economic Review of February 16, 1989, Larry Niksch, an Asian specialist with the United States Congressional Resedrach Service, proposes that in the upcoming negotiations about the future of the U.S. bases in the Philippines, Washington volunteer to hand over its base at Clark Air Field to the Philippines, while securing long-term rights to its naval base at Subic Bay. In Niksch's opinion, Clark serves mainly as a supply and defense auxiliary to Subic, and its logistic functions could be duplicated by expansion at Subic, its defense services, by the Philippine Air Force flying out of Clark (thus subordinating the Philippine military even more to the Pentagon).

Niksch's proposal, if carried out, would have the appearance of a major concession to growing Philippine nationalism. On that score Niksch especially recommends it as a way "to accommodate the more moderate elements of Filipino nationalism, and hopefully, to isolate the extremists," in other words, to divide the Philippine nationalist movement.

In reality, however, while substantial economic gains could accrue from a turnover of Clark's facilities to the Philippines, this would only be at the expense of that nation's sovereignty, if the trade-off was a prolongation of the U.S. military presence at Subic.

Today Subic enables the U.S. government to escalate at will its military presence in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, as it has done on and off since the fall of Iran's Shah and the Iran-Iraq war. Subic thus has the potential of entangling the Philippines in a U.S. war of Third World intervention.

Moreover, Subic base links the Philippines to U.S. nuclear war-fighting capa-

bilities in a most serious way. To preserve this link Washington insisted that the October 1988 bases agreement allow the U.S. Navy to bring its nuclear-armed vessels into Subic, in clear violation of the Philippine Constitution of 1987. In any extension of access to Subic after 1991, the U.S. government would certainly attempt to force the same requirement. It is this use of Subic Bay by the nuclear-armed forces of the U.S. Navy that most especially causes the Philippines to be a target of retaliation in any nuclear confrontation between the two super powers.

This situation has particular danger for the Philippines today, because as the U.S. nuclear weapons expert, William Arkin, writes, "...current naval practices and strategies threaten international peace in a way that land-based military activity does not...and conditions are being created that increase the likelihood that a nuclear war will begin at sea."

To enumerate some of the practices and strategies Arkin believes make nuclear war at sea more likely:

- "Sea-based nuclear weapons are seen by some as a way to avoid the political controversy and constraints on the operations and use of land-based nuclear weapons." The INF Treaty and the objection of the West German people and their government to short-range land-based nuclear missiles would seem to fuel this point of view.

- The release of land-based nuclear missiles depends on and is limited by a chain of command procedure, whereas the firing of such sea-borne missiles is at the discretion of each naval vessel's commander, guided only by indoctrination and training

- Although the concept of limited nuclear war at sea is being questioned by

some within the service itself, the fact remains that short-range "battle-field" nuclear weapons are disposed throughout the U.S. Navy. In addition the military tend to take a more relaxed attitude towards limited nuclear war at sea because of the absence of "collateral damage" (buildings, capital equipment, and people that would be destroyed on land). This attitude however, overlooks the possibility that limited nuclear war at sea might escalate to all-out nuclear exchange between the two super-powers.

- What is currently called the U.S. "Maritime Strategy" is particularly threatening, since it depends on the nuclear-armed vessels of the U.S. Navy, in case of war, coming as close as possible to the coastal borders of the Soviet Union. To prepare for such a contingency, naval exercises have been carried out in the '80s in which the U.S. Navy has assumed an aggressive posture in the waters close to the Soviet shores. It might interest Filipinos that such activity has been particularly notable in the Pacific, where Arkin writes, "Large-scale and highly provocative military maneuvers have been conducted in the Northern Pacific waters by the U. S. Navy at greater frequency than any other region."

In Sept.-Oct. 1989, the Pentagon plans to hold PACEX, the largest war games ever held in the Asia Pacific region, covering an extensive area, including the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Aleutian Islands, and the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy, Army, Air Force, and Marines will be joined by Japan's Self-Defense Forces, and South Korea and the Philippines have expressed willingness to take part. U.S. forces will be mobilized from bases in Hawaii, Guam, South Korea, Japan and the Philippines.

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What is striking about these war games scheduled for the fall of '89 is that they will be conducted in the face of and in apparent disregard of President Gorbachev's well-known proposals to lessen tensions and strategic confrontations in the Pacific and to lessen or remove the danger posed there by U.S. and Soviet medium and short-range nuclear weapons. In the Asia-Pacific region, as well as in Europe, the Bush administration seems to be pushing a hard, pro-nuclear line (to the right of Reagan, according to veteran U.S. arms control adviser Paul Nitze).

This brings attention to the second misconception that might be fostered by the Niksch proposal: the belief that the dominant policy-makers in the Bush administration are at the moment in any way open to concessions to Philippine nationalism. If this were to be believed, it could relax the struggle waged by many Filipinos to rid their country of U.S. bases. Far from appearing ready to give up Clark, however, Washington plans to invest \$463 million from 1987 to 1993 to upgrade its facilities. The current reality seems to be that the Bush administration (including the Pentagon and the C.I.A.) plans to hold on to both Clark and Subic in 1991 and supports the Philippine military and right-wing forces attempting to suppress the growth of nationalist opposition to the bases.

It is in this light that developments in the Philippines such as the following must be seen: the current red scare that hits at base opponents and is stimulated by the Philippine military and the religious right; the military threats to illegalize popular organizations that oppose the bases; the move in the lower house of the Philippines Congress to abolish the Philippine Senate where opposition to U.S. bases is most outspoken; the kidnapping and torture by the military in April, 1988, of two young men putting up anti-bases posters in Manila (one of whom died as a result), followed by the disappearance of 11 anti-bases activists from July to November, 1988.

It is not suggestions from wily government Asian specialists like Mr. Niksch that will bring any concessions from President Bush in the matter of U.S. bases in the Philippines. Rather, these will come only as a result of wide and militant popular struggle. ■
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