PEACE BUILDING:
THE CENTERPIECE OF THE PHILIPPINE ECUMENICAL AGENDA

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Introduction

I am a post-World War II baby so its gruesome events are not part of my conscious past. My parents’ experiences were nothing but bedtime stories which they narrated to me. And since they were not very good story tellers, their narratives did not conjure dramatic images. Neither did the stories make deep impressions on my young mind then.

However, when I was around 5 years old, my family moved into a new house. Naturally, we had to painstakingly transfer our stuff from the old house and neatly put them away in the new one. In the process of moving, I chanced upon a box of old pictures, one of which was of my mother’s family. I studied the picture and tried to recognize my aunts and uncles. I could not place one woman in the picture. I asked my mother who the woman was. She responded: “That is your Aunt Nena.” “I didn’t know I had an Aunt Nena. Where is my Aunt Nena?” I asked. “She died during the war.” I sensed a quiver in my mother’s voice. And when I asked how she died, it took my mother some time to answer. When she finally regained her composure, she said, “She was beheaded by Japanese soldiers.”

That statement of fact, I vividly remember, created in me an anger against wars and a distrust of Japanese people. That was compounded when my other aunt showed me her scars. A Japanese bayonet had pierced through her neck. How she survived that episode is a miracle.

Transition

The present day impression of Filipinos about Japan may have changed drastically but the dark years of World War II are still etched on the collective memory of Filipinos who belong to my parents’ generation. Not one of them wants to return to the past and a “rearmed Japan can send shivers not only down the Chinese spine” but of the Filipinos’ spine as well.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines is a long standing partner of the National Christian Council of Japan. We have expressed this mutually beneficial partnership in many forms. The NCCP appealed to Prime Minister Koizumi to refrain from visiting the Yasukuni Shrine because of the political statement those visits
make. We have released statements about the textbook issue. We have supported the campaigns of comfort women and challenged the Japanese government to apologize for the havoc it wreaked upon Asian countries during the war. The NCCJ has, in turn, raised our issues: Japanese ODA, overseas contract workers, extrajudicial killings. My presence at this conference is yet another sign of our continuing support to an important issue that NCCJ and the Japanese people are concerned about.

Peace building is at the very core of the ecumenical agenda in the Philippines. I dare say that everything the NCCP does is related to the process of peace building. And our efforts are buoyed by our analysis of the regional situation. We are most concerned about the move to change Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution because the very same US hegemonic pattern is very obvious. The successful amendment in the Japanese constitution is a victory for US Imperialism.

THE WAY WE LOOK AT IT

As early as 1898, American President William McKinley ordered his Chief Engineer of the War Department to put the Philippines on the map of the United States. History shows that the US was interested in the Philippines not only because of its raw materials and its potential market for US surplus products but also as a staging point for US expansion and interventionism in Asia, particularly China. The United States would become, as Theodore Roosevelt advanced, the hub of US military power projection not only in Southeast Asia but in the world. The Philippines also served as America’s staging base in pursuit of its policy of aggression against many countries, first, on the pretext of containing communism and today, of fighting “terrorism”.

In the last fifty years or so, US imperialism, according to Philippine representative Liza Largoza-Maza, has sought domination of the world by using its military might and invoking its self-serving doctrines of intervening in sovereign states when its interests are in danger.

There are no two ways about it. Interventionist policies in Asia are not about protecting the world from the enemies of freedom and democracy. In 1998, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense of Asia and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, said: “We are in the Asia-Pacific region, not as a favor to Asia, but because it is in OUR interest. We believe that our forces in Asia allow the US to maintain and secure partnership with Japan. They deter aggression in the Korean Peninsula. They serve as a useful mechanism to engage China. And our military presence is a reminder to all those in the region that the United States is not an ephemeral or transitional actor in the Asia-Pacific, but we are a fundamental player and will continue to have interests there.” That statement provides the justification for the creation of a network of remote military powers against its perceived enemies, hostile states and potential rivals. (LL Maza)

But why this warring madness? It is because the United States has no other objective but hegemonic control in Asia. US trade with the Asia Pacific surpasses that with Europe. About 400,000 US non-military citizens live and conduct business
in the region. Southeast Asia, with a combined GNP of US$700 billion is the 5th largest trading partner of the US. US$ 35 billion is directly invested in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. There are vast oil and gas reserves in Indonesia and Brunei, as well as Vietnam, and the Philippines. It is in Asia where some of the world’s most critical sea lanes lie which are a strategic part of the network of oil extraction, production and distribution. Asia is a place of great economic consequence for the United States. It will stop at nothing to secure these economic interests and activities.

It is very unfortunate that many states, Japan and the Philippines included, have been seduced by the sirens of globalization. The former have sunk their teeth deeper into the monopoly capitalist system peddled by the United States. It is a sad commentary on reality that constitutional provisions which try to safeguard national sovereignty are either deleted through charter change or over ridden by treaties and agreements. Section 1 of the Declaration of Principles of the Philippine Constitution unequivocably states that the Philippines “renounces war as an instrument of national policy.” That resonates with Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. However, Philippines jurisprudence includes the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement, and the Visiting Forces Agreement forged between the United States and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines. We dismantled the US military bases in 1992. Today, under the Visiting Forces Agreement, the whole country is a potential military base. And US troops have freely returned to the Philippines in the guise of the RP-US Joint Military Exercises.

THE PANGS OF A NEO-COLONY

Some critics say that with the Amendment of Article 9, Japan will commence the journey toward being a military power in the region. Maybe. One thing sure, though, Japan will be trapped in the stranglehold of this sole global power. Knowing the position of the United States vis-à-vis this movement toward constitutional change, I am inclined to believe that Japan will be sucked into the US military strategy, making her (Japan) almost like what the Philippines is to this global power today. Perhaps, not on the same level; but, just the same, dependent on the United States. And then, nothing will stop the US from making Japan fight proxy wars and demand subservience to the Empire. Worse, as an ally of the US, Japan opens itself to attack by powers which are in conflict with the US. (Let me remind all and sundry that one reason why Japan pounded the Philippines during World War II was because we were America’s friend.) As Japan continues to maintain this US-driven war footing, more and more resources will be siphoned into war materiel. The proverbial “swords into ploughshares and spears into pruninghooks” will see a complete reversal. Budget priorities will drastically change and there will be less money for basic social services. And then such words as “hungry”, “homeless”, “unemployed” will become part of Japan’s vocabulary. And then, if the situation gets too hot for comfort, the hungry, the homeless, the unemployed, joined by peace activists will let out their primal screams of anger. And “to keep the peace”, the Japanese soldiers will try to silence violently what, to them, is noise.
The political and military configuration in the region is still another issue to contend with. As a consequence of being a “neo-colony” of the United States, as I earlier said, Japan’s vulnerability to external attack is heightened. What guarantee is there that, in this event, the United States will come to the rescue of Japan? (I am merely raising a question.)

**HOW ABOUT ECONOMIC AGGRESSION?**

I cannot end this reflection without lifting up a clear and present danger that the Philippines is saddled with relative to our relationship with Japan, in which peace, for our people, precariously hangs on the balance. While the discourse on Article 9 is predicated on the military stance and muscle-flexing of Japan, I believe we need to also highlight the Japan Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) signed by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi last September 9, 2006. Japan, being the Philippines’ second largest trading partner and the largest source of foreign capital investments, entered into this “mega treaty” with the Philippines without pomp or circumstance. In exchange for tariff reductions and eliminations on certain goods, including toxic and hazardous waste, Japan promised to facilitate the entry and employment of Filipino nurses and caregivers into Japan. Furthermore, because Japanese oceans and seas can no longer adequately supply your restaurants with bluefin for your sushi and sashimi, the Agreement has opened our fishing grounds for tuna to Japanese fishing companies which is killing the livelihood of Filipino small fisherfolks. Here is an unequal treaty with Japan that is as deadly as a militarized Japan. But that is the subject matter for another conference.

**CONCLUSION**

I have come to this conference to share our experience with a government that has insisted on being a US satellite... a US ally... a US neo-colony. It is a blood stained experience that has caused hundreds of Filipinos to be offered on the altar of sacrifice. I believe our experience of resistance to charter change under a number of presidents is our contribution to the pursuit of just and lasting peace in our region. I wish to close with some inspiring words of a Filipino nationalist statesman:

“The best amendment to the Constitution would be the amendment of our own lives, the amendment of our attitudes, outlook and actions, the realization that we are free persons, and the resolution to live and act as free persons.”

“Let us so live and act that our lives and deeds will be the safest stronghold against the abuse of tyrants, the schemes of ambitions and the cupidity of the corrupt.”

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