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AIRPOWER: MODERNIZING THE ROLE OF THE PHILIPPINE ARMY

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AIRPOWER: MODERNIZING THE ROLE OF THE PHILIPPINE ARMY

AIM

1. This paper aims to suggest the importance of Airpower to army operations and how an equipped Army Aviation Regiment can enhance the implementation of Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. If realized, the new approach will more likely produce efficient use of CAS and acquire CAS platforms more suitable for supporting ground operations. This new approach will provide the necessary platforms to achieve tasks more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

2. **The Philippine Army Air Corps (PAAC)** - The PAAC was created through the National Defense Act of 1935 as the air component of the Philippine Army, where it played a vital role in the country's defense in World War II. In 1947, it was abolished and turned into the Philippine Air Force (PAF), which delegated the Close Air Support function supporting ground operations from the PAAC to the PAF. From the PAAC's abolition in 1947, the Philippine Army had no air component capability. In July 2019, the Philippine Army Aviation "Hiraya" Regiment was established. However, in its two (2) years of existence, its functions and capabilities were limited to Aerial reconnaissance missions. Due to this, there is a need for the Philippine Army to develop its aviation capability as it is one of the identified capability gaps needed to address the current and emerging threats confronted by the ground forces. As the Philippine Army developed its organization, the former aviation battalion was likewise developed to keep pace with its organizational development. As a result, the aviation regiment (provisional) was activated as a Philippine Army major unit at the same time pursue the development of their capability components.

3. **The Lack of Close Air Support** - The 205th Tactical Helicopter Wing of the PAF conducts tactical helicopter operations and limited air support in the conduct of COIN operations of ground forces.¹ The wing operates Bell UH-1H Huey, Dornier-Bell UH-1D Huey, the Bell 412EP, and the S-70i Black Hawk combat utility helicopters.² Among the above-mentioned rotary aircraft, three (3) platforms have significant issues identified that compromised the PAF's air capabilities to support ground operations:

a. *Bell UH-1H Huey* – Comprise more than 50% of the rotary aircraft in the inventory of the PAF and wherein most have served more than 30 years in the AFP. The said aircraft is at the end of their life expectancy and are due for decommissioning. Currently, the fleet is grounded and is considered non-mission capable, cutting down the effectiveness of CAS capability in half.

¹ "Philippine Air Force," in *Wikipedia*, January 4, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Philippine_Air_Force&oldid=1063658204.

² Ibid.

b. *Dornier-Bell UH-1D Huey* – these are the recently acquired helicopters of the PAF intended to augment the Bell UH-1H Huey fleet. The said aircraft is now permanently grounded due to several air mishaps and crashes resulting in pilots and aircrew deaths. The issue of the aircraft is its modified fuel systems that easily rupture during air crashes significantly reduced the passenger survivability in such incidents.

c. *Bell 412EP* – The AFP has acquired eight (8) units of the said aircraft and has satisfactorily passed its test and evaluation, meeting the requirements of ground troops for CAS. However, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte canceled the proposed purchase of the additional 16 of these helicopters due to Canada's restrictions and limitations on its sale and the utilization of said platforms for COIN operations.³

4. **AFP Modernization Program** - The Armed Forces of the Philippines Modernization Act, officially designated as Republic Act No. 7898 aims to modernize all branches of the AFP within fifteen (15) years.⁴ And further amended by RA. No. 10349 known as the AFP Modernization Act, which extended the modernization program for another 15 years, aimed at building a defense system capable of addressing the assessed threats,⁵ The program is divided into three (3) Horizons (phases).⁶ The first from 2013 to 2017, the second from 2018 to 2022, and the third from 2023 to 2028.⁷ Despite improving Philippines-China relations, President Rodrigo Roa Duterte pushed to finance the second Horizon of the AFP modernization program, which intends to shift the Armed Forces military posture from internal to territorial defense.⁸ The move was due to the recent Chinese escalations in the South China Sea, including the landing of bombers in the Paracel Islands, installing missile and jamming systems in the Spratly's, and harassment of Filipino fishermen inside the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).⁹ This shift entails changes in the different component capabilities of the services to align with the said transition.

³ "Philippines President to Cancel Canada Helicopter Deal," *BBC News*, February 9, 2018, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42969362>.

⁴ "AFP Modernization Act," in *Wikipedia*, December 20, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=AFP_Modernization_Act&oldid=1061166615.

⁵ The Corpus Juris, "RA. No. 10349: An Act Amending RA. No. 7898. Establishing the Revised AFP Modernization Program and for Other Purposes," The Corpus Juris, December 11, 2012, <http://thecorpusjuris.com/legislative/republic-acts/ra-no-10349.php>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "Duterte OKs AFP Modernization Shopping List for Horizon 2 | Inquirer News," accessed January 19, 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1002560/duterte-oks-afp-modernization-shopping-list-for-horizon-2>.

⁸ "The Next Phase of Philippine Military Modernization: Looking to External Defense," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 12, 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/the-next-phase-of-philippine-military-modernization-looking-to-external-defense/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5. Problems and Limiting factors

a. The PAF assumed the entire or most of the air functions of the PAAC when it became a separate branch of the military in 1947. The Army and Air Force would conduct joint missions as a team, and the PAF would provide tactical airlift and CAS support to PA. Particularly in the CAS matter, tensions would arise between the Army and Air Force regarding who and how to assume the role. As a consequence of the Army's dissatisfaction with the CAS provided by the Air Force in its operations, the Army did not agree with the centralized command and control the Air Force proposed. Just like American and British pilots, Filipino aviators give priority to missions that do not require complex liaisons with ground forces, subordination of air forces to ground requirements, or wear and tear of air resources in lucrative but dangerous assignments.¹⁰

b. Reports from the respective Unified Commands (UC) deployed all over the Philippines have raised their issues and concerns during COIN operations. Common problems and issues encountered are the following:

- Lack of deployed helicopters in UC's Area of Operations;
- Deployed platforms and assets have limited capabilities to conduct CAS, Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC), and Medevac during COIN and Disaster relief operations;
- Inter-operability concerns of tactical ground radios (Harris) to CAS aircraft;
- Limited Air Insertion capability of deployed assets; and
- No ISR support during the implementation of target packets.

c. The need for Aviators is a concern for the PAF from the onset of the AFP modernization and transition from Internal to Territorial defense operations. This is further aggravated by pilots resigning from the service to join commercial airlines for higher pay and allowances. Further, the situation is constrained by Republic Act No. 8186, June 11, 1996 - an act prescribing officer grade distribution in the active force of the armed forces of the Philippines and limiting the tenure of officers in the grades of colonel/captain (PN) and general/flag officers in the AFP.¹¹ The provisions stated in this law strictly specify the allocation of the number of officers required by each branch of service (component) of the AFP. As long as this law is not amended, the AFP could not

¹⁰ Cooling, Benjamin Franklin, "Case Studies in the Development of Air Support", July 2, 1990, <https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/24/2001330067/-1/-1/0/AFD-100924-035.pdf>

¹¹ "Republic Act No. 8186 : REPUBLIC ACTS - PHILIPPINE LAWS STATUTES and CODES," accessed January 23, 2022, https://laws.chanrobles.com/republicacts/82_republicacts.php?id=8142.

increase its officer corps to address the additional need for aviators of the PAF unless it is sourced out of its existing authorized strength.

6. Importance and Opportunities of Air Power in the Army

a. *“Passive Posture”* – is the ability of army aviation to perform reconnaissance, combat support, and search and rescue tasks that are highly time-sensitive.¹² These would alleviate the burden from the PAF and entail dedicated capabilities for CAS, CASEVAC, and MEDEVAC to Army Divisions conducting COIN operations.

b. *“Active” Posture* - 'active' posture involves the Army Aviation taking on a more proactive role through the utilization of specialized units like the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) of the United States Army.¹³ As a result, Army Aviation would be used extensively for assault missions, operating alongside Special Operations Forces. Operation Neptune Spear, the incident that led to the killing of Osama Bin Laden is a notable example of this type of operations success.¹⁴ Lieutenant General Rick Burr (Chief of the Australian Army) stated that creating an Army Aviation Command (AVNCOMD) will enhance the service's resilience and adaptability while ensuring that its training is adaptive and up to date.¹⁵ Moreover, he explained that the Army's aviation capability optimizes the capability to support land, amphibious, and special operations as part of its command.¹⁶ The Army Aviation Corps' Integration in the Combined Arms Team would improve substantially under such an approach and ease the concerns of the PAF. As a result, this approach would prove effective for counterinsurgency and Special Forces operations which is the type of operation Philippine ground forces are conducting.¹⁷

c. *Inter theater operations* - From an international standpoint, the Philippines is an economic partner in ASEAN and has bilateral agreements with allied militaries. Defense interoperability between these allies is becoming increasingly critical. Interoperability is required for partner nations to train, exercise, and execute missions efficiently. Furthermore, the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the US and the Philippines requires joint military operations that are cohesive, effective, and efficient to accomplish common tactical, operational, and strategic goals.¹⁸ From the Philippines

¹² Pranay S Ahluwalia, “Army Aviation: Does the Army Need Its Own Air Force?,” n.d., 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Update: Australian Army Launches Aviation Command,” Janes.com, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/update-australian-army-launches-aviation-command>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ahluwalia, “Army Aviation: Does the Army Need Its Own Air Force?”

¹⁸ “Interoperability,” in *Wikipedia*, October 27, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Interoperability&oldid=1052096072>.

allied militaries, the United States army aviation and marine corps perform the CAS capability and practice “active” posture.

Table 6.1 — Disposition Helicopters of Philippine Defense Partners

Country	Army	Air Force	Navy	Total
Australia	107	-	47	154
China	677	50	103	830
Indonesia	133	27	31	191
Japan	504	71	127	702
Korea	560	40	60	660
Malaysia	30	18	15	63
Philippines	3	93	8	104

Source: “List of Equipment of Armed Forces” Wikipedia, January 21, 2022

The table represents the distribution of helicopters among the components of the Philippines' defense partners. Among the nations in Southeast Asia and Oceania that the Philippine Army has allied with, it has the fewest air capabilities. The ground components of all the other allied nations and defense partners, except for the AFP, are responsible for CAS and tactical airlift.

d. *Capability Planning and Development* - Inter-operability needs to be taken into account as a factor in capability planning and development of Airpower. The Commanding General of the Army’s report to the assistant chief of staff for operations needs to be addressed. This is because the latest radio communication equipment acquired by the Army is incompatible with the most recent Air Force platforms. The failure of communication caused CAS aircraft to be unable to support engaged troops. This could be attributed to the separate planning conducted by the major services for identifying equipment to be procured. The quick stopgap by ground forces to remedy the problem was the deployment of Tactical radio operators’ onboard CAS aircraft.

e. *Delineation of Roles and Responsibilities on Internal to External Defense Operations* – This is the end of the era of believing "everything that flies belongs to the air force." Today, a component's capabilities are determined by its role in the conduct of missions. In conflicts since World War II, air superiority and air interdiction have been proven to be the Air Force's most valuable support to the Army - both for victory on the ground and limiting casualties.¹⁹ Due to the implementation of the AFP modernization program by 2022 (2nd Horizon), it is now necessary to define the roles of

¹⁹ “The Ups and Downs of Close Air Support,” *Air Force Magazine* (blog), accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/the-ups-and-downs-of-close-air-support/>.

the Army and the Air Force in the conduct of CAS, air interdiction, and air superiority. By doing so, the PAF would focus on capabilities and platforms more appropriate for the transition from internal to territorial defense. Moreover, the Army would be able to plan and perform COIN operations more effectively.

CONCLUSION

7. Airpower is an essential capability of the armed forces and essential for the Philippine ground forces confronting rebel threat groups and Terrorism. With the evolution of warfare, so should the armed forces' ability to respond effectively and efficiently to these threats. In order to achieve this, the AFP would ultimately optimize its capabilities by defining roles and responsibilities, developing doctrine, and acquiring equipment that effectively addresses the concerns that tactical units face in their area of operations. Thus, we can maximize the potential of our assets, be cost-effective in our procurements, and eventually end insurgency, enabling the AFP to transition to territorial defense by CY 2028 fully.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Having established that there exists a concern of the lack of Airpower to the Army to conduct COIN operations and the inevitable transition from Internal to external defense which led to the PAF's acquisition of platforms that are more suited for External Defense operations. The following are recommendations to be considered regarding the need for Airpower in the PA:

a. Short-term – First, PA aviators from the aviation regiment must start to be trained with the incoming platforms (Sikorsky UH-60 Blackhawk) to transition said platforms as the Horizon 2 of the AFP modernization would be implemented. Second, the immediate deployment of Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTAC) to address the communications concerns by ground operating units. Third, given the limited number of capable platforms, the strategic deployment of Air Ambulances within the Areas of Operations of the ground forces is required to allow rapid deployment. Moreover, the strategic deployment of ISR assets to cater to the requirements of adjacent commands given the limited number of platforms for said functions.

b. Medium-term – Deployment of Sikorsky UH-60 Blackhawk from the 32 platforms expected to arrive in the next few years to boost the capability of the aviation regiment, initiate its training for the said platforms to increase the number of rated pilots for the platform, and allow the Aviation regiment to implement its “active” posture for the rapid insertion of troops in COIN operations.

c. Long-term – as AFP modernization takes full swing, the need to transition the CAS and Tactical airlift functions from the PAF to PA to include equipment

and facilities. The role of CAS and Tactical Airlift would now be the responsibility of the Army in the conduct of COIN operations.

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