In January 2014, the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, ending the 40-year insurgency in Mindanao. But as the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAP) completed the agreement with MILF, it continued negotiation with the Communist Party of the Philippines’ (CPP) armed wing, the New People’s Army and political unit, the National Democratic Front (commonly referred to as the CPP-NPA-NDF), and five additional groups that split off from the CPP.

While the Mindanao insurgencies rose to visibility in the 21st century’s global “war on terror,” the Maoist CPP people’s war is a Cold War struggle. This 40-year conflict is regarded as the longest-running communist insurgency in Asia. Chief political consultant Jose Maria Sison claims that the CPP seeks a “just and lasting peace” that is impeded by Philippine neo-colonialism, the exploitative conditions of semi-feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism. There has been intermittent success. Twenty-seven years of often-disrupted negotiations have produced more than ten peace agreements that consider significant root causes of the Philippine economic and political context.

The CPP’s primary target for critique is the U.S. imperialist entanglement in the Philippines, which began when the U.S. acquired the Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. American military presence remained after the Philippines gained independence in 1946. Its two primary bases, Subic Naval Base and Clark Airbase, were major sites of deployment during the Vietnam War, though the Philippine government voted not to renew the lease in 1991. It took the new global war on terror for the Bush administration and Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo to revive bilateral military agreements. Invoking the Philippines as a second front on the U.S. war on terror, the U.S. military initiated Operation Balikatan (Shoulder to Shoulder) to train Filipinos in counterterrorism against Muslim insurgencies in Mindanao. It is thus not surprising that the entanglement of global wars (Cold and Terror) might make their mark on any Philippine insurgency.

Soliman Santos, a key Filipino Peace Advocate, argues that this inordinate reference in the Mindanao processes to the global “war on terror” has been damaging not only to the MILF peace process but also
on-again off-again negotiations with the Communist Party. In Primed and Purposeful Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines, a comprehensive recent study of Philippine insurgencies, he and others note that the Philippine government interprets its main security problem not as terrorism but as national liberation movements. Santos raises serious questions about the accuracy of descriptions of terrorist networks, of the major listings of terrorist organizations, and of various definitions of terrorism. In the article “Is There an Al Qaeda Network in Southeast Asia” (Asia Insights, 2003), Kim Beng Phar also refers to a tendency “to connect seemingly unrelated dots to form a vast network’ and to use terrorism as ‘the conceptual blueprint to explain religious and political violence’ in the region.”

This blurring of terrorist designations has also marked the CPP. Not long after Balikatan was established, General Powell announced that the New People’s Army of the CPP would be included on the U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organizations list under somewhat sparse criteria. While the Abu Sayyaf group was also included, the MILF remained conspicuously absent.

This designation has been useful as a tool against the leftists. The Netherlands followed the FTO designation by withdrawing assistance for the exiled CPP leaders in Utrecht. As a third-party designation it has obstructed peace talks between the CPP-NPA and the Philippine government. “Let the Stones Cry Out,” an ecumenical document published in 2007 by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines at the
height of the Arroyo administration’s bloody campaign of extra judicial killings, makes this point quite clearly:

The so-called ‘war on terror’ has served to strengthen the hold of the government and the military over the people, as development and military funding from overseas governments is provided in return for the government’s support of the ‘war on terror.’

In the last two years, there have been attempts to return to the CPP and GPH table, with Norway as the third party. There is some intimation of progress. While it has been highly controversial, a good faith effort would be to request that the U.S. drop the CPP from the Foreign Terrorist Organization list.

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