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US needs to rethink its foreign policies

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IT has become a sickening scenario nowa-days. A terror bomb goes off, shattering lives, limbs and families in a place where conventional wisdom pronounces it as safe.

For those of us whose work brings us to Davao City in the Philippines, the city is indeed safe and secure by Filipino standards. City folk never fail to point out that bombs and insurrections may be commonplace in other parts of Mindanao but not in this jewel of the Philippine south.

It has a long-serving, no-nonsense Mayor in whom many in Davao instinctively trust with their personal safety.

A Malaysian consular official based in the city once conceded Davao to be "paradise" by comparison.

Perhaps it is a disturbing new terror code - to strike in places proclaimed as "paradise". And it would seem to make eminent sense, no matter how twisted. The shock is that much more acute when something terrible like a terrorist bomb goes off in "paradise".

The Abu Sayyaf group claimed responsibility for this latest attack but were quickly discounted. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which has more popular support among Mindanao Muslims, and which has, so far, claimed its secessionist battles against Manila by targeting military installations, has been held up as a more plausible suspect.

If suspicions against the MILF prove true, it would mark a serious escalation in the war between Manila and the secessionists.

Whatever hopes of a peaceful settlement through negotiations may be dashed if Manila fails this time to resist pressures to label the MILF a terrorist organisation. When that happens, life in Mindanao can only get more complicated, especially if the Americans insist on charging in like the proverbial bull against the red tag of a "terrorist" outfit.

There is much popular support among Filipinos for American troops to come in and do what the Philippine Armed Forces patently cannot - keep the peace.

The Philippine Government is jittery about such a prospect, in part because of the constitutional bar against foreign troops in local combat.

It is a complex conundrum which brute military force may only offer some instant relief. A more adventurist Government in Manila may welcome the Americans with open arms in what would be a populist move.

The contention, as always, is what happens when peace is forcibly enforced. The argument of the hawks - American or Filipino - is always the uncomplicated one that good can only come out of rooting out evil, without bothering to discover if the evil under attack may in fact be a reflection of an even larger evil within a given society.

If the hawks calling the shots in Washington are only less lazy, they would have long realised that what is happening in the Philippines right now is turning all conventional American thinking about political governance on its head.

Massive social problems such as poverty, crime and insurrections brought on at least partly by corruption and an anaemic economy are conditions common to both repressive dictatorship and democratic governments in the Philippines.

The democratic restoration in the country is just three years shy of its 20th anniversary - about the time it took Malaysia to transform itself under the Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad administration.

The US, so much resented everywhere now needs to seriously re-think its foreign policy options to avoid undermining friendly and sober Governments in developing countries and, in the process, making them even less able to take decisive action against the great social evils which manifest themselves now and then in petty crimes, rebellion and, yes, terror acts.