The Philippines-U.S. Strategic Relations: An Enduring Partnership?

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Abstract
The Philippines and the U.S. united by historical ties, long associations and mutual interest regard their relationship as “special relationship.” The security relationship has been evolving through different phases and stages. Towards the end of Obama administration, the Philippines-U.S. relationship nearly hit a dead end. However, in the current scenario with the “evolving Philippines-China relations” and the blossoming of “bromance” between Philippines President Duterte and the U.S. president Trump it seems Duterte’s diplomacy has risen to the occasion. This article seeks to examine the background of the security relationship between the Philippines and the United States. It will throw light on the current trends of the Philippines-US strategic relation and examine its implications and sustainability.

Keywords: United States, China, Philippines, Security Relationship, Strategic

Historical Backdrop of the Security Relationship
The U.S. and the Philippines have shared a long historical association which dates back to the 19th Century when the Philippines was under the Spanish colonial rule. The Filipinos and the Americans fought side by side against the Spanish which was colonising the Philippines for over three centuries. On December 10, 1898, under the Treaty of Paris Spain ceded the Philippines to the U.S. for twenty million dollars. Thus, began the era of U.S. rule. In 1934, under the Tydings-McDuffie Act, the Philippines came under Common Wealth Government till independence on July 4, 1946. Post-independence the two countries became a close ally thus heralding a “special relationship.” The Philippines is the only country into which the American values, democracy and institutions have been so deeply entrenched. The United States is her main trading partner, the source of foreign investment, biggest military ally, and a source of a large part of her political tradition as well as a cultural model for many Filipinos. Undoubtedly, American influence is greater in the Philippines than the rest of Asia (Wurfel1966:150). As the popular maxim goes the Philippines was shaped by “300 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood” (Hincks 2016).

During the World War II, the Common Wealth of Philippines was briefly occupied by the Imperialist Japanese forces (1941-1945), the Filipinos and Americans fought collectively against the Japanese forces. As a result of Japanese invasion, the Philippines was in a bad shape. Hence it turned to the U.S. for support and assistance. On March 1947 the Military Base Agreement (MBA) was signed between the Philippines and the United States. Under the treaty, the Philippines allow the U.S. to use its military base for a period of ninety-nine years. However, later with an amendment, the ninety-nine-year period was reduced to twenty-five years with the provision that it can be subject to renewal if mutually agreed upon (Lim1987:422). During the Cold War, the Philippine government supported most of the United States Foreign Policy development in Asia.

“It [Philippines] accepted both economic and military aid, refused to recognize Communist China, allowed American forces to remain on the Philippines soil, sent troops to fight in Korea, sponsored the Pacific Charter, promoted SEATO, spoke up for democratic ideals and hopes at Bandung, and in general stood firmly by its former guardian and present ally” (Taylor1966:72).

Post-Independence, the Mutual Defense Treaty (1951) and the Visiting Forces Agreement (1998) became an essential component of the security relationship between the two countries. Another critical security component was the Mutual Logistic Support Agreement 2002 and 2007 (renewed in November 2007) between the two allied states which calls for “increased logistics cooperation.” In other words, security relation or agreement has become one of the most important binding factors in the bilateral relationship between the formal master and colony.

Withdrawal of the military base and its aftermath
The military bases in the Philippines provided logistic support to the U.S. military operations in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and even to the Northeast Asia. It also targeted to support operations in East Africa and provide a conduit to the Middle East. The Soviet access to naval and air facilities in Vietnam, 700 miles away enhanced the importance of the bases. The bases are an important element in the “regional superpower balance” and an indication
of “U.S. regional pre-eminence” (Mediansky1987:308-309). In fact, the base provided the Philippines security umbrella and economic gain. However, the presence of the military bases is also a source of tension between the Philippines and the United States. Furthermore, there were other factors which brought hiccup in the bilateral security relationship like the issue of compensation payments, criminal jurisdiction and the issue of national sovereignty (Storey1999:102-103). Besides, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War the importance of the Philippines has diminished in the United States security radar. A sense of nationalism fostered in the Filipino leaders which invoked debate between the pro and the anti-U.S. Military base establishment. For the nationalist, the military base was a grim reminder of the neo-colonialist relationship imposed by the former master, the U.S. Indubitably, the military base contributed a great deal to the Philippines weak economy. Next to the Philippines government, the bases are the second largest single employment generator (Berry Jr.1990:316). On September 16, 1991, the Philippine-American Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Security which provided for a continued U.S. military presence for ten years was rejected by the Philippines Senate by a vote of 12-11. This resulted in the withdrawal of the U.S. military base namely Clark Air Base, Subic Naval base. However, the withdrawal of U.S. military bases was regarded by the nationalist as defending democracy, protecting sovereignty and expressing national pride. Post the base closure, security relationship between the two began to wane. In the post-Cold War period, the relationship between the two countries was at a “low phase.”

As the Philippines heavily depended on the United States for its security challenges, it neglected its internal defense Capabilities. The Armed forces of the Philippines (AFP) was under-armed and lacked sophistication, besides, the country battled threats of insurgency and terrorist along with assertive China in the South China Sea. The country, hence, suffered numerous security challenges. Thus, the lack of Philippines-US defense cooperation has resulted in a “power vacuum” that China has taken advantage of (Fisher Jr 1999). In 1995 Mischief Reefs incident raised alarmed to the Philippines government as China built structure within the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). As a result, in 1998 to counter the growing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea, the limited capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the lack of Philippine capability to tackle the rising “transnational security concerns” resulted in the signing of the Visiting Forces Agreement(VFA) with the United States. The VFA authorise the “rotational presence” of the U.S. troops in the Philippines. The VFA eased the relationship, however, “not necessarily revived” it. It provided the legal framework for the two countries to resume joint military exercises. Besides, it presented substance to the MDT, reminding both countries of their “special relations” (Banlaoi 2002:299). Since the VFA came into existence, the Philippines - United States forces have been conducting joint military exercises under the series called “Balikatan” meaning Shoulder-to-shoulder (Banlaoi 2002:300). The VFA also provided that U.S. troops undertake a “non-combat role” and prohibited “permanent base of operations” on the Philippines (Lum &Dolven 2014:12).

PH-US Partners against Crime-War on Terror

When the U.S. declared “War on Terror” after 9/11 terrorist attack, Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo promptly declared its support for the Global war on terrorism. The Philippines even offered its military facilities at the former Clark Base and Subic Naval Base for the U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan. In reciprocal, the U.S. promised Philippines U.S. $100 million for development aid and the U.S. $55 million for anti-terrorism drive (Caballero-Anthony 2002:1). In recognition of the Philippines role in the fight against War on Terror, “Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA)” status was conferred on October 6, 2003. This exchange of mutual support is a milestone in Philippine-U.S. relations as it resuscitates the security relations between the two countries (Banlaoi 2002:295). The Philippines has its own problem of terrorism and has become an important epicenter and haven for groups like the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), allegedly linked to Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida group. In the early 1990s, the Al Qaeda funded the Abu Sayyaf group through Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden’s brother-in-law through Islamic charities in the southern Philippines. According to reports, the 1993 World Trade Centre bombings was plotted by Ramzi Yousef. He also set up Al Qaeda cell in Manila and was accused of conspiring to kill the Pope and planning various attacks (Niksch2007:4-5). As the Philippines has terrorist groups active in the country it served as an important network and channel for the U.S. policy of “War on Terror.” Thus, the two countries make a great team in the fight against terrorism.

On November 2002, the Military Logistics and Support Agreement (MLSA) was signed for a period of five years which permitted the American forces
to use the Philippines as a “logistic support, supplies and services” for military operations in the region. The U.S. Forces were positioned to support the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in counter-terrorism activities. The Joint exercises targeted mainly at the terrorist network in western Mindanao and Sulu weakened the terrorist threat (Lum & Dolven 2014:12).

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)

Under President Benigno Aquino the relationship was warm and cordial which led to three important strategic components namely, internal balancing by a policy of defense modernization, diplomatic legal strategy, taking the South China Sea under international arbitration and increasing of security cooperation with U.S. and other countries like Australia, South Korea, Vietnam and Japan (Greitens 2016). Most importantly, just prior to President Barack Obama’s visit to the Philippines, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed with the U.S. on April 2014, which was in aligned with the “U.S. policy of Pivot” in the Asia Pacific. Though there were skeptics of the legality of EDCA fearing that it will result in the permanent presence of American troops in the Philippines nonetheless the Supreme Court approved the EDCA on January 2016. The framework agreement of EDCA provided for “the increased presence of U.S. military forces, ships, aircraft, and equipment in the Philippines on a non-permanent basis and greater U.S. access to Philippine military bases” (Lum & Dolven 2014:3).

Evolving Relationship with China and Implications

Since President Rodrigo ‘Rody’ Duterte came to office on May 9, 2016, the power equation between the Philippines and the U.S. began to change. President Duterte’s foreign policy orientation is a departure from his predecessor, Benigno S. Aquino III, who was a staunch supporter of the U.S. During his four days visit to China on October 2016, President Duterte signed 13 documents on bilateral cooperation agreements with China which is a sign of ‘evolving relationship.’ He even threatened “separation” from the United States. During Obama administration, the relations turned sour as the President criticized Duterte drug war to which Duterte reacted negatively and thus drifted towards friendlier stance with China and Russia. However, Duterte on his return from Beijing, “clarified” that he could not cut ties with the U.S. as “the Filipinos in the United States will kill me” (Hincks2016).

On January 2013, Benigno Aquino III government under the U.N. Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) filed a case against China which claimed the entire South China Sea. The Hague ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016 went in favour of the Philippines. China was absent throughout the proceeding and it refuses to comply with the ruling (Santos 2016). According to the Chinese President Xi Jinping, The Hague ruling would not have an impact on the “territorial sovereignty and marine rights” in the South China Sea and that China is ‘committed to resolving disputes’ with its neighbours (Philips, et al. 2016). Since China simply refuse to comply with the ruling unless there is an enforcement mechanism The Hague verdict will remain ineffective. It is not certain whether the U.S. will come to defend the Philippines in the case of a military confrontation between the Philippines and China. The U.S. reiterated on the freedom of navigation and commerce on the South China Sea. Nonetheless, it has so far refused to take a committed stand in the territorial disputes of the South China Sea for fear of jeopardizing its relations with Beijing. It is rather playing safe and remains aloof from the unnecessary entanglement which could bring hiccup to the bilateral relations between Washington and Beijing. The Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951 raised concern as the treaty does not have automatic assistance provision under the treaty, in case of an attack on the Philippines, the United States must “meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.” It is not clear whether the United States’ treaty obligations apply to the South China Sea scramble if in any case military confrontation arise (Greitens 2016).

Duterte’s attempt to curry “diplomatic and economic concessions from China” belittled the South China Sea conflict in the ASEAN summit meeting in Laos (Renato Cruz De Castro2017:140). However, it is uncertain how long the Philippines and China would undermine the South China issue given their history of occasional confrontation in the past. Duterte’s shift in fostering the Sino-Philippines relations has given China the upper hand to “undermine ASEAN centrality” in South China Sea disputes, thus, compelling Other claimant states to move forward with a bigger role not merely by protecting their respective interests rather to give more emphasis to “ASEAN centrality” in handling the issue. National defense and Security should not be compromised by the Philippines or any ASEAN country over economic cooperation with China. It is necessary for ASEAN nations to put forward “common interest” and have “unified stance” on the South China Sea and should not count on “single
member or external partners” to resolve the problem. It is naïve to assume that China would back down in the South China Sea due to positive developments of relations (Principe 2017).

Internal security challenges and US assistance

The Philippines has a “complicated security environment, encompassing significant internal challenges.” The archipelago is vulnerable to natural disasters which require massive demand on the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. Besides, it faces domestic challenges related to crime, piracy, terrorism and insurgency movements (Greitens 2017). The Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November 2013 which claimed thousands of lives reflected Philippines weakness in disaster management and relief. The U.S. forces immediately responded to the disaster and coordinated closely with the Philippines in disaster and humanitarian assistance.

In terms of internal security threat battling terrorism in the Southern Philippines has been one of the most pressing security challenges. On May 2017 the Maute group allied to the Islamic State attacked the Marawi city of Lanao del Sur led by Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers, Omar and Abdullah. This resulted in the declaration of Martial Law in the entire area of Mindanao region till December 31, 2017. The U.S. provided “security assistance and training” to the AFP in the “areas of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance” (Morales and Lewis 2017). Ironically, President Duterte who had brutally criticized the U.S. needs their help to battle the IS threat in the region even more and he later acknowledged the U.S. for their assistance. This is a reversal of Duterte from his earlier statements against the U.S. and its intervention. With the killing of the leaders Hapilon and the Maute, the five-month siege ended on October 16, 2017.

PH-US Keeping alliance intact?

Though Duterte on several occasions has threatened to sever ties with the U.S. no substantial change has been visible, the 2017 calendar of joint activities have been unchanged. It will take some time for the Philippines-U.S. security relations to become clear, given the mercurial character of both the controversial Presidents (Dalpino 2017:5). The Philippines-U.S. engages in several other security engagement platforms such as Mutual Defense Board (MDB) - Security Engagement Board (SEB), Balikatan Exercise etc. Furthermore, on September 2017, Exercise Tempest Wind, a bilateral multi-agency drill was inaugurated which intended to test and improve the ability of Filipino and the United States troops to “plan, coordinate and conduct counterterrorism operation”. It ran for five days from September 18 - 26 in Clark Field, Pampanga where over 1,200 Philippine and US civilian and military officials participated. This first counterterrorism drills the two forces strengthen the campaign against the Maute terror group as it joined forces with the ISIS (Viray 2017). Another military exercise carried out under Trump and Duterte administration was KAMANDAG (Cooperation of warriors of the Sea) held on October 2017 which was in line with the MDT and VFA. The KAMANDAG focus on “enhancing counterterrorism capabilities, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities, and conducting humanitarian and civic assistance projects” (Flanagan 2017).

Towards the end of Obama Administration, the Philippines-US Security relations nearly hit a dead end however with Duterte-Trump Administration the relationship recalibrated. Duterte’s foreign policy preserves US security guarantees but at the same time availing economic benefits from China. With Duterte administration the Philippine -U.S. uneasiness has alleviated as he advanced more “constructive personal ties” with Trump (Steinbock 2017). Trump being less critical towards Duterte and his extrajudicial killings, the two leaders shared a great bonding. In the telephonic conversation, President Trump commended Duterte that he was “doing an unbelievable job on the drug problem” (See Philstar May 25, 2017 Transcript).

As President Duterte seeks for an ‘independent foreign policy’, the truth is that the Philippines is still significantly reliant on the US, particularly in defense. Moreover, reducing dependence on Washington will take decades which is not feasible within the six-year term (Parameswaran, 2016). The Philippines reducing its dependence on the United States should not be regarded as a sign of Manila shifting away from the ‘US pivot in Asia’ nor as an evolving bandwagoning with Beijing. Rather, it is a rational foreign policy alternative for enhancing its strategic interest by “omnidirectional hedging” with other regional powers (Suorsa 2016). In maintaining a balance in foreign policy with the U.S. and China, the Philippines has several factors to be taken into considerations, namely, China’s massive economic clout which is an element the Philippines have to take into considerations. On the other hand, domestic security challenges, like the country’s huge demand for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), insurgency problem and counter-terrorist activities, and last not the least, to shed the image of American neo-colonialism (Greitens 2016). Thus, Philippines is caught
between the economic giant China and the traditional security provider the U.S. However, it should be noted that both the U.S. and China friendship comes with a "string attached to it"). Moreover, in the “complex security landscape of the 21st century, it is more difficult for most countries to have clear-cut strategic alignment” (Galang 2017). According to the Philippine defense officials, China has been pushing for greater security cooperation in the future. However, there is a limitation of Sino-Philippine cooperation which is in a “low level” as compared to the Manila’s traditional partners as well as “lingering distrust” of the two countries due to the South China Sea differences (See Parameswaran 2017).

On the recently concluded President Trump 12-day trip to Asia on November 2017 Trump attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vietnam on Nov. 10, subsequently followed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in the Philippines. On the sidelines of ASEAN summit at Manila the two leaders had a bilateral meeting, the meeting focused on the “areas of common ground” such as “Islamic State and illegal drugs as well as on trade issues.” During the conversation, Trump did not criticize Duterte on the drug war, though drug problem briefly came up, however, the subject of right was not broached. Trump also boast having “Great Relationship” with President Duterte (Davis 2017). The Philippines-U.S. security relation is the “fallback position of Duterte’s hedging approach (i.e., independent foreign policy),” on the other hand, for the US security alliance is an integral part of representing its “superpower status.” Among others, security alignment with the Philippines reinforces its ability to “penetrate the East Asian Regional Security Complex.” Therefore, it is apparently in the interests of both countries to maintain the security alliance and the continuation of the Philippines-U.S. security relations can be anticipated (Vicedo 2017).

Conclusion

Retrospection of the historical security relationship one can observe that the Philippines and U.S. have been through various ups and downs. However, despite the occasional tension and hiccups in their relationship in the past the so-called “Special relationship” have managed to endure. In the current geopolitical landscape, the Philippines stuck in a dilemma between “traditional ally” and “new found friend” vis-a-vis security and economic priority that is, the United States and China respectively. However, it should be noted that the Philippines is one of the most pro-American nations in the world and Philippines-American connection range from a whole gamut of security, economy, political, cultural and people-to-people tie. The Philippines-US strategic relations have endured in the past and it will hopefully endure in the future and so far, Duterte’s smart diplomacy pays off in engaging both “the giants.”

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