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Malaysia-Philippines Ties under Duterte: Prospects and Challenges

By David Han

Synopsis

Malaysia-Philippines relations under the new Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte are likely to remain cordial and warm. The inherent pragmatism of the leaders of both countries would translate into stronger cooperation on shared mutual interests.

Commentary

THE INAUGURATION of Rodrigo Duterte as the new president of the Philippines marks a transition in the country's foreign policy. While seen as an unpredictable leader who projects fire-brand rhetoric on foreign policy matters, Duterte has also displayed flexibility and pragmatism. Combined with the pro-active and pragmatic approach of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in foreign policy, this could bode well for Malaysia-Philippines bilateral relations if leaders of both countries are focused on furthering cooperation based on shared mutual interests.

Under former President Benigno Aquino III, key milestones in Malaysia-Philippines relations were reached. For example, Malaysia was instrumental in facilitating the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). However, Aquino had rattled Malaysian sensitivities when he asserted Philippines' claims over Sabah.

Sabah Issue: Maintaining Status Quo

Just before taking office in June this year, Duterte remarked that he would pursue Philippines' claims over North Borneo through peaceful means. Najib had

responded strongly that the Philippines should instead focus more on dealing insurgency problems in the Southern Philippines.

Although reigniting the Sabah issue may earn domestic political expediency for Duterte, it is actually difficult for him to pursue a hard-line stance on Sabah. Firstly, political leaders in Sabah from both the Barisan Nasional (BN) and opposition camps have voiced strong opposition to the Philippines' claim over Sabah. Secondly, Sabah's entry into Malaysia in 1963 is legally recognised by the United Nations. Thirdly, Sabah plays the key role of a "fixed deposit" for the BN-led government's political and electoral success. Fourthly, Sabah's rich maritime oil reserves are too important for Malaysia's economy.

Given these reasons, it is certain that Malaysia would strongly safeguard its sovereignty over Sabah. As Najib is strengthening his political regime after a difficult period of political turmoil, Najib and his government would most probably beef up support for the state of Sabah as part of his strategy to gain domestic political support. Hence, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Duterte may not be able to alter the current status quo drastically.

Tackling Insurgency Problems and Extremist Groups

Over the past decade, the Malaysian government has put in considerable effort and resources to assist the Philippines to resolve the insurgency problem in Mindanao. For Malaysia, the continuing problems of the southern insurgency, increasing radicalisation and activities of extremist groups, and the growing threat of Islamic State (IS) have to be tackled to enhance Sabah's security and curtail the spread of extremism in the region.

Malaysia's security concerns has been accentuated, given that the Mindanao peace process faced a serious setback when clashes in January 2015 between Philippine security forces and MILF guerrillas led to the deaths of Philippine police commandos. As a sign of deep displeasure, the Philippine congress adjourned in February 2016 without passing the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) which would enable the development an autonomous region on Mindanao for the island's Muslim majority. Later that month, Najib met with MILF leader Murad Ebrahim to urge the MILF to uphold the peace process.

Najib is not alone in actively seeking the resolution of the peace process. In June 2016, Duterte met with top leaders from the MILF and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to continue discussions on the peace process. In addition, Duterte has expressed that he will deal with the problem of Abu Sayyaf and the IS threat in the Philippines. Hence, optimistically, Malaysia's ongoing efforts to assist in the peace process would serve a welcome and complementary role to Duterte's keenness in bringing about reconciliation and lasting closure to the southern insurgency in the Philippines.

South China Sea Disputes

On the South China Sea disputes, although the Philippines and Malaysia are claimants, they have taken different approaches to stake their claims in the

region. Whereas the Philippines under Aquino had taken a tough and vocal stance towards China, Malaysia has adopted a moderate approach through diplomacy and ASEAN multilateralism to help ease tensions.

In contrast to his immediate predecessor, Duterte has taken a more conciliatory posture to engage China in dialogue on the South China Sea disputes. Some may interpret this approach as potentially undermining Malaysia's preference and support for a unified ASEAN-multilateralism to managing the disputes. However, Duterte's toned down approach towards the South China Sea issue converges with and will indirectly strengthen Malaysia's advocacy for the diplomacy to take centre stage in reducing tensions regarding the disputes.

The Philippines' decision to seek international arbitration on the South China Sea issue would also have implications for Malaysia. Should the outcome of the arbitration be in favour of the Philippines, it could serve as potential catalyst for the Philippines to seek international arbitration regarding the country's overlapping South China Sea claims with Malaysia.

Looking Forward

Duterte's position on the Sabah claims has indeed raised concerns from Malaysian leaders. Yet, this is not uncommon throughout the history of Malaysia-Philippines relations. So far, more prominent issues have taken centre-stage in bilateral relations, and these include maritime security, kidnappings, piracy and extremist threats, among others. These are key opportunities for Malaysia and the Philippines to forge closer ties for cooperation during Duterte's tenure as President of the Philippines.

Such cooperation would require shared mutual interests for bilateral relations to progress positively. Fortunately, signs are pointing to Duterte's adoption of a pragmatic foreign policy, and this is highly compatible with Malaysia's own principled and pragmatic foreign policy which aims to promote good neighbourly relations. Political will and shared interests would provide ample grounds to manage differences amicably and strengthen relations.

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