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Hedging against Over-dependence on US Security: Thailand and Philippines

By Olli Suorsa

Synopsis

Thailand and the Philippines are seen distancing from the US and leaning toward China. This should not be understood as switching allegiances but as refusing to choose sides and diversifying their economic, diplomatic and military relations with multiple regional powers.

Commentary

MUCH HAS been written about Thailand, under the coup junta, and the Philippines, under the populist President Rodrigo Duterte, becoming regional "trouble-makers". Following the American criticism on attacks against democracy and violations of human rights, Bangkok and Manila — two of the oldest United States allies in the region — have been seen distancing themselves from Washington and veering toward Beijing; putting a question mark on the effectiveness of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" policy.

Instead of causing more waves in the region's contested waters, Bangkok and Manila's foreign policy approach approximates with the sub-regional pattern of omnidirectional hedging: By doing this both governments seek to avoid over-dependence on any one country — not by abandoning their long-standing alliances with Washington — but rather by rational diversification of security relationships in the face of growing regional uncertainties. This has two main objectives. The first is to lower the tensions over the disputed South China Sea. The second is to refuse having to choose sides in the Sino-US rivalry.

Change Towards Omnidirectional Hedging

Both Thailand and the Philippines are two of the oldest US allies in Asia. Manila signed a Mutual Defence Treaty with the US in 1951 and Bangkok in 1954, during some of the hottest years of the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new regional order, however, alliances are becoming increasingly rare; strict threat-based (reactionary) alliances dissolved as their common threat disappears. In the absence of a common threat both Thailand and the Philippines have come to view the alliance with the US as “too close for comfort”.

In a historical perspective, balancing and bandwagoning have been exceptions rather than the norm. In case of small states, strategic hedging has proven to be the most viable option in keeping the equidistance from multiple regional great powers, avoiding being entrapped in an unintended regional conflict, and in preparing for long-term security uncertainties.

Strategic hedging has become the norm within the core Southeast Asian states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as they seek to benefit from the massive economic opportunities provided by the rise of China while tying the US and other regional great powers to the region through ASEAN institutional frameworks. Southeast Asian states hedge against the uncertainties related to the rise of China and its increased assertiveness as well as against the concerns about the continuity of the future American military presence in the region.

Three Benefits for Small States

In pursuing the strategy of omnidirectional hedging — avoiding being entrapped in the ensuing Sino-US rivalry — Southeast Asian core states attempt to enmesh all relevant regional powers into the ASEAN-centric multilateral frameworks as well as in the dense network of bilateral security arrangements. This strategy carries three main benefits for small states’ survival.

First, enmeshing all relevant regional powers as stakeholders increases the number of balancers in the regional system, making it more difficult for any one state to force their will over others. Second, the inclusion of multiple stakeholders addresses the fears of both US dwindling down its regional presence and the uncertainty about the nature of China’s rise. Third, diversification of bilateral security and military relations decreases the over-dependence on a single source for military hardware and technology procurement.

The Philippines sources over 75% of its military technology from the US. Similarly, despite the recent high-publicity submarine acquisition from China and the ongoing procurement programmes from Russia, Bangkok’s “big-ticket” military acquisitions are still predominantly obtained from the US and Sweden. Much of the American military support, however, is conditioned with improvements in human rights and return to democracy, angering the populist leaders in Manila and Bangkok.

As a warning of putting all eggs into one basket, Indonesia’s privileged access to American advanced military technology was denied in the late 1990s after Washington’s arms embargo against Indonesia, following the country’s war in East Timor. Indonesia’s case underscored the dangers of security over-dependence on a

single source and the need for a diversification of security partnerships with countries that impose less conditionality, such as Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, or India.

During the President Aquino III administration — the new “honeymoon period” of the US-Philippines alliance — the Philippines enhanced its security relationship with Washington in several areas: most importantly the signing of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014, which provided the US an enhanced military access to several air and naval bases in the Philippines archipelago. Emboldened by the renewed American involvement President Aquino took a stronger stance against Beijing’s increased assertiveness in the Philippines EEZ.

Diversifying Security Relations

Since coming to power in April 2016, the Duterte administration has “turned the boat” by threatening to throw the American special forces out from the insurgent-ridden Mindanao in the country’s south, cancelling bilateral military exercises and joint-patrols with the US, as well as reviewing the EDCA. Duterte’s foreign minister stated that Philippines will cease to be just America’s “little brown brothers” and to “open (trade and investment) alliances” with both China and Russia with interest in procuring weapons from both countries.

Duterte also ordered the country’s military establishment to turn its attention back to the more imminent internal security challenges — a departure from Aquino’s hard-fought re-emphasis on external security matters. More broadly, Manila has diversified its defence relationships by engaging South Korea and Japan in defence technology cooperation, with Seoul providing Manila with modern fighter jets and frigates, and Tokyo offering patrol vessels and maritime patrol aircraft.

In Thailand, following a period of warm diplomatic relations with Washington during Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra’s administration, the military coup in May 2014 soured the intimate relationship with the US and halted or toned down several bilateral military exercises such as the Cobra Gold, one of the largest annual military exercises in the region.

Much in the same way as during the previous military coup — the ousting of Yingluck’s brother Thaksin Shinawatra — in 2006, Thailand’s military junta has subsequently approached China as an alternative source of military hardware. In a further diversification, Bangkok has pursued acquisition programmes from South Korea, Russia, India, and Eastern Europe.

The Philippines and Thailand’s “new normal” — reducing their overt dependence on American security umbrella should not be seen either as an oddity, an indicator of Manila and Bangkok veering away from the US pivot to Asia, nor as an emerging bandwagoning with Beijing. It is a rational foreign policy alternative for enhanced strategic flexibility that approximates with the sub-regional tendency of omnidirectional hedging — diversification of economic, political, diplomatic, and military relations with multiple regional powers.

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