

Southeast Asia Revisited in Trump Time

The Philippines, Singapore and The Next Stage

The Philippines

In my 1993 chapter, the section on the Philippines made several critical points about the nation's politics, and those same critical points largely apply today. The 1993 chapter noted "a growing Philippine nationalism that was resentful of, and at the same time exploitative of the United States. I wrote that "Manila has had no foreign policy design or leadership at all," and concluded that Manila's efforts "were marked by the same ineptitude that characterised...Philippine foreign policy generally." Those were harsh words, but are little different from those of Robert D. Kaplan, managing director of the Eurasia Group. In assessing the capabilities of Pacific region states to deal with coming foreign policy challenges, Kaplan recently commented dismissively that the "The Philippines is a badly governed, weakly institutionalised archipelago."

It is true that Rodrigo Duterte, President since mid-2016, has made an imprint on Philippine foreign policy different than any predecessor, largely by initiating a China relationship closer than anything that has gone before. His stance evokes the 1990s efforts of former President Corazon Aquino to terminate the American military base relationship and reflects the deep ambivalence of Filipinos towards the US.

That stance includes much bitterness, rooted in the history of the relations between the two peoples which also contain much warmth, reflected in the fact that more than three million Filipinos live in the United States; that America is sometimes half-jokingly called by Filipinos "the land of the great PX"; and that the US is the nation most looked up to. Indeed, among Filipinos who aspire to study abroad, a university degree from Fordham or better yet Georgetown has long been the gold standard. In sum, Philippine ambivalence towards the US does not fit the classic "love-hate" category; it is more akin to that of "love-resentment."

Duterte's statements about loosening his country's ties to Washington first gained notoriety in 2016, when he visited Beijing and talked of "separation" from the US. He soon walked back those comments, but his remarks on the United States have continued to be sharply negative. Although like most Filipinos a Catholic, Duterte does not come from the often moneyed and part-Chinese elite of Manila and Quezon City; he comes instead from the Philippines' often rougher and Muslim-minority south. And while his tough crackdown on the drug culture has brought much criticism, mainly from abroad, his public approval at home is very strong: opinion ratings of 70 per cent and 80 per cent are common. The only other Philippines group with important policy differences with the President, aside from human-rights and related activists, consists of some in the military who have had long defence ties with the United States.

Those military doubts stem from a new and major geopolitical reality that did not apply when the 1993 chapter was written. I wrote then that “no Filipino has ever had to worry for a moment about foreign threats to national security.” That statement is clearly no longer true; it has all been changed by the rise of China. That rise has brought new meaning to an old and fixed reality: only 770 miles – the same distance as from Jakarta to Kuala Lumpur – separates the Philippines’ main island of Luzon from China’s Hainan Province, the site of a major Chinese military and submarine base.

This fact concentrates the minds of military planners. This makes it all the more remarkable when President Duterte spoke of a new “separation” between the United States and the Philippines. He appeared to cast aside the single most valuable military asset his vulnerable nation may have: a defence treaty with the United States. Since 1951, a formal Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty is in place – under which each promises to go to the aid of the other in the event of military actions that threaten one or the other.

Nevertheless, in recent years there have been increasing doubts in the Philippines about the applicability and reality of those American guarantees. In December 2018, for example, Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana called for a review of the treaty, in order to see whether “to maintain it, strengthen it, or scrap it.” It was against that background that on 1 March 2019 the US Secretary of State specifically sought to put those doubts to rest. Speaking in Manila, with a written text at his side, Secretary Mike Pompeo formally and unambiguously defined what those guarantees entailed. These were his words:

As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific, any armed attack on any Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.

Even and especially in the age of Trump, when it is often said that other nations do not know what to expect of American foreign policy, the promises of the United States do not get any clearer than that. The words were spoken by a Secretary of State who is himself a product of the US Military Academy; who was most recently the Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency; and about whom there is not the slightest evidence of any difference in views between himself and the President on matters such as these.

Pompeo’s statement is particularly notable in several respects. First, because it makes unalterably clear that the geographic coverage of direct interest to the Philippines, i.e., the South China Sea, is specifically included in the American guarantee. Second, because it makes clear that an armed attack against any Philippine government forces, i.e., aircraft or public (or naval) vessels, will be covered and will bring about an American response.

Nevertheless, in February 2020, President Duterte capped his intention to further separate the Philippines from the United States when he announced Manila would terminate the “Visiting Forces Agreement” the two governments had signed in 1998. The agreement facilitates the visits of American troops, ships and aircraft to the Philippines and provides the basis for US training of local troops and the conduct of joint exercises. Duterte’s action, which perhaps was prompted by US Congressional and State Department criticism of reports of widespread extra-judicial killings in the Philippines, does not end the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, but it will clearly make its implementation more difficult. Not surprisingly, US Defence Secretary Mark Esper called it a “move in the wrong direction” and only time will tell whether the governments of China and the Philippines, the two intended audiences of Mr Pompeo’s guarantees, will take those words into account and act accordingly.

Singapore

In sharp contrast to the Philippines, foreign policy in Singapore has always been a highest-level concern, owing to its small size, its multi-ethnic makeup, and its island status. In the 1993 chapter I wrote that Singapore’s approach had been marked by “realistic pragmatism,” and that it had set out to make itself “something of major value” to itself and others. Both precepts have continued to shape its policy.

Like Israel, another small state surrounded by not necessarily friendly neighbours, Singapore has understood from the start that it must have a significant national defence capacity, and that understanding continues. In a recent essay that asks whether the strategic vision of Singapore’s founding statesman Lee Kuan Yew is still relevant, co-author Han Fook Kwang wrote that there were “four pillars of Lee’s Strategic Vision,” and that first among them is a “strong defence... a small state like Singapore needs a credible armed forces to deter would-be aggressors.” The centrality of defence he summed up this way:

*Whatever happens, Singapore’s commitment to its own defence which Lee first defined will not change. This was how he put it in *Hard Truths*, a book I was involved in just before he stepped down from government in 2011: “Without a strong economy, there can be no defence. Without a strong defence, there will be no Singapore. It will become a satellite, cowed and intimidated by its neighbours.”¹*

The 1993 chapter also noted that Singapore’s leaders have further recognised that their small state must represent important value to others who might affect Singapore’s security, and of those others, none has been more important than the United States. Washington has long appreciated that Singapore has always welcomed and provided secure berths and facilities for elements of the US naval fleet, and

¹ Han Fook Kwang, “Post-Lee Kuan Yew World: Is His Strategic Vision Still Relevant?” *RSIS Commentary*, No. 61/2019, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 1 April 2019.

Americans have also recognised Singapore's special and secure value as a reliable banking and business centre. At the same time, while Singapore has sought to develop and maintain good relations with China, India and Australia, it knows too that continued US engagement in the region is key to Singapore's security.

That continued American engagement is based on the fact that the United States is permanently a Pacific Ocean power, a reality itself based on the unchanging fact that America's Pacific Ocean coastlines are as long as China's. Former Singapore Ambassador to the United States Chan Heng Chee fully understood that permanent reality. She knew that the widely-reported notions of an American "pivot to Asia" or its "rebalance to Asia" were meaningless, because, as she wrote, "The truth is the United States never disengaged itself from Asia. It could not possibly."

Indeed, reflecting on her time in Washington, Ambassador Chan further recalled, perhaps with some impatience, that "The question of whether the United States will stay in the region is one that irks all American officials who cannot understand why they have to constantly reassure their allies and friends in the region of their commitment."² That possible impatience reflects another reality: that Singapore fully understands its place in the world, and knows too what Singapore must do to retain its security.

That was precisely the point made by Singapore's Prime Minister, writing in the current (July-August 2020) issue of *Foreign Affairs*, about the security issues faced by Southeast Asian states when dealing with the uncertainties of American policy in the time of Trump. When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote that "should conflict occur they cannot automatically take US support for granted" and that "They expect to do their part to defend their countries and interests" he demonstrated convincingly that he and Singapore have fully internalised the lesson his father taught regarding Singapore's need for a credible and strong defence.³

The Next Stage

With regard to the next stage for Southeast Asians concerned with their nation's security, the only predictable certainty is that China and the United States will continue to strive to maintain their goals in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴ Regarding China, many believe that Beijing aims to replace the US as the dominant power in the Pacific region but Chinese leaders regularly deny that is their goal, and in any case the United States has never aimed for "dominance" in the region.

² Chan Heng Chee, "ASEAN-US Relations: Finding the Right Balance," in Tommy Koh, Sharon Seah Li-Lian, and Chang Li Lin (eds.), *50 Years of ASEAN and Singapore* (World Scientific, Singapore, 2017). I have known Chan Heng Chee for more than 50 years; any impatience by her may be explained by the fact that, like Dean Acheson, she has never been one "to suffer fools kindly."

³ Lee Hsien Loong, "The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

⁴ While the term "Indo-Pacific" is now being urged for what has long been called the Asia-Pacific region, the evidence so far supports the view that the long-standing label still applies more accurately.

Instead, the central US goal in the Asia Pacific, as with other regions, is that there be no single-nation dominance. It was to prevent that outcome that beginning in the 1930s, the United States opposed Japan's foreign policies in Asia, a policy that led ultimately to their conflict and America's defeat of Japan. The same concern, i.e., to avoid any single-nation dominance in Europe, principally motivated US policies and behaviour in that region as well.

In today's Asia, where of course the rise of China is the major new factor, a central point from the US perspective is that the presence of such strong and prosperous states as Japan and South Korea is a most welcome reality. Their roles, and that of Australia in the south, mean that the Asia-Pacific region is not characterised by any single-nation dominance. That structure is a clear manifestation of what is meant by multipolarity, and it is precisely what has been sought for many decades by the United States.

For those Southeast Asian nations committed to maintain their separate independence and sovereignty the implications are clear: a multipolar East Asia is the international structure that best serves their national interest. Because multipolarity has also long been a fundamental US foreign policy goal, that commonality may suggest to Southeast Asian states a policy of regular close alignment with the US. But that connection may not or need not apply in every case, and that problem points up a dilemma that several are likely to face as they seek to maintain good relations with both China and the United States.

Australia's May 2019 election campaign hints at the issue: Labour party leader Bill Shorten said he regarded China not as a strategic threat but as a "strategic opportunity," and with regard to the United States he said it was time for Australia "to stand on its own feet and think for itself." But that approach, which implied a very significant departure for Australia, evidently was too much of a shift for the Australian electorate. The election outcome showed that Shorten and his party, though strongly favoured to win, in fact lost to Scott Morrison's Coalition in a surprising victory that many termed a "miracle."

As Southeast Asia's states in the coming period likewise attempt to steer a course between the two markers of American and Chinese foreign policy, they must with full frankness accept that those two are not equivalent. China's Xi Jinping knows there is widespread awareness among his people that in past centuries Beijing was the entire region's imperial power that held sway over wide swaths of land and sea not now ruled by China, and today that awareness is reinforced by the commitment of both leadership and people to restore national pride and compensate for "a century of humiliation."

In the US instance, while there is widespread acceptance that America is both historically and presently a rightful economic and political Pacific region power, the Trump Presidency means that as long as he is in office, little is certain to be predictable, because American foreign policy actions are now under the ultimate control of a man who came to office profoundly ignorant of Asia and its history, and with little

knowledge of the past century of American behaviour in the region.⁵ Such an environment holds great potential for errors and collisions, and those in Southeast Asia committed to their separate identities and existence will need to weave their path to maintaining it by seeing to their defences, and promoting, to both Beijing and Washington the need for all to adhere to their own national interest as the best method to assure that all continue to exist.

⁵ In Washington, in the first months after Trump's inauguration, it was commonly reported that his initial debriefers found he was not aware that the U.S. had been involved in WWII in the Pacific as well as in Europe.