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US-Philippines: Resetting the Security Alliance?

By Julius Cesar Trajano

SYNOPSIS

Despite Duterte's desire to shift Philippine security policy away from its treaty alliance with the US, Manila remains a close American ally. Key domestic, strategic and humanitarian factors actually make the alliance healthier. The Biden administration might just wait for Duterte to finish his term in a year's time.

COMMENTARY

DESPITE THE pro-China and anti-American rhetoric of President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines definitely remains a close ally of the United States and the bilateral alliance should be seen as considerably healthy. The alliance has been bolstered by shared maritime security interests in the South China Sea as well as America's robust humanitarian engagements with the Philippines' vulnerable local communities.

There has been a formidable pushback from the Philippines' security and policymaking actors as well as the general public on cutting defence alliance with the US while cozying up to China. Nonetheless, Duterte's renewed threat to completely abrogate the [Philippines-US Visiting Forces Agreement \(VFA\)](#), after he postponed its termination last year, has again raised doubts about the future of the alliance. Would it complicate the efforts of President Joe Biden's administration to reinvigorate the US alliance? Or would things improve with the end of the Duterte presidency next year?

Deeply Rooted Alliance

Duterte's threat to terminate the VFA came after Philippine and US secretaries held discussions on security cooperation to reaffirm that a strong US-Philippine alliance is vital to a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Both US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin

and State Secretary Antony Blinken renewed a previous commitment by the US to defend the Philippines against external armed attack in the South China Sea.

The renewed threat comes on the 70th anniversary of the [1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defence Treaty](#) (MDT), which has been the bedrock of bilateral military cooperation since the end of World War II. The Philippines is among the five formal US treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific. Anchored in the treaty is the VFA which allows joint military exercises between American and Filipino forces.

The joint military exercises have been the most evident manifestation of the bilateral partnership. In recent years, disaster response has been added to maritime security and counter-terrorism joint training exercises.

To make their alliance responsive to contemporary security challenges and opportunities, the Philippines and the US signed [the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\)](#), allowing the US to build and operate facilities in Philippine military bases for its rotational deployment of troops and equipment.

Still a Vital Anchor

The alliance with the Philippines is still an important anchor for the US position as a resident power in Southeast Asia. It is in the mutual interest of both the Duterte administration and the Biden administration to preserve the alliance, particularly the implementation of MDT, VFA and EDCA.

Aside from counter-terrorism cooperation, they are vital for disaster relief cooperation amidst rising vulnerability of the Philippines to disasters. These arrangements are also crucial for projecting America's military presence in the South China while deterring China's use of force against Philippine troops and any hostile actions that would limit US freedom of navigation in the region.

Apart from the South China Sea, crises such as the Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and the Marawi City Siege, which happened during the Duterte presidency in 2017, actually vividly demonstrated how maintaining the alliance is beneficial for the Philippines.

For the past 10 years, the US has provided not just military equipment and key intelligence information but also [US\\$340 million](#) worth of humanitarian and rehabilitation aid, such as the Marawi Response Project, to affected local communities.

Why Manila Remains a Close US Ally

There are several reasons why the Philippines remains a close ally of the US, despite Duterte's pronouncements. First, the Philippine military and the rest of the defence establishment maintain a very close partnership with the US military given the long history of joint trainings and professional exchanges between the two militaries.

The defence establishment has subtly moved to even postpone the termination of the VFA. And after Duterte's latest threat, his own [Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana](#)

announced that the military is largely supportive of the continuation of the VFA with the US.

Second, while its military modernisation has been steadily progressing, the Philippine armed forces benefit from regular and short-term training visits of US forces and capacity building assistance. Since 2015, which covers most of Duterte's six-year term, US military aid for the Philippines amounted to [\\$765 million](#), making the Philippines by far the largest recipient of US military assistance in the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, 60% of Filipinos see their former coloniser, the US, as the [country's most trustworthy foreign partner](#), based on a recent survey. China, in contrast, is among the least trusted. Public opinion or sentiment matters in determining key government policies and actions in the Philippines.

Fourth, beyond high-level security talks and military exercises, the alliance relationship has already deepened and broadened. This takes place through US Agency for International Development's (USAID) grassroots engagements with local communities, businesses, academics, NGOs and local governments in the context of addressing climate-related security risks and disaster preparedness.

Way Forward

The Philippines-US alliance is strong enough to weather any storm. Nonetheless, there are various approaches the Biden administration could pursue while waiting for the end of Duterte's term and a new administration in Manila by June 2022. First, as Philippine and US officials are about to meet to discuss the future of VFA, the US can convey that it will at least review the "differences" that Manila needs to iron out, especially the criminal jurisdiction over US troops in the Philippines.

Second, any form of US assistance that can help the Philippines solve its COVID-19 vaccine procurement problem would solidify US support within the government and among the public. Public sentiment in the Philippines indicates extreme concern over China's vaccine diplomacy and high preference for other vaccines, including from the US.

Third, the US can utilise the burgeoning Philippine security ties with other US treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific. South Korea and Japan have become major defence suppliers to the Philippine military and coast guard in recent years, while Australia has further deepened its security cooperation with the Philippines. These countries can help convey to Manila the importance of maintaining all treaty alliances in the region for all of them.

Finally, the Biden administration can maximise the robust impact of USAID's humanitarian and grassroots engagements and put them at the forefront of US policy towards the Philippines. In this way, no amount of petty rants can trump a deeply rooted US alliance with the Philippines.

Julius Cesar Trajano is Research Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg