



A US view of separation: Goodbye, good riddance

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There's two sides to a coin. Aggrieved Filipinos say America never outgrew its colonialist bent. Deceiving the Philippines as an "equal ally," it demands access to Philippine military bases but denies Filipinos modern weaponry. It doles 15 times more military aid to three authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and South Asia than to democratic treaty-ally Philippines. It even profits from Filipino US-visa applicants, while getting visa-free training in the Philippines for thousands of American GIs each year.

On the other hand, the Philippines is an unreliable ally, the US scoffs. It drove away US military bases in 1991. It broke ranks from the US-led Coalition of the Willing against the Axis of Evil in 2004 just for an errant OFW in Iraq. That year it broke ranks from its own ASEAN allies for a joint seabed exploration with China that emboldened the latter to claim the whole South China Sea. So why risk war for a country unwilling to fight for itself?

If mutual defense is unworkable for the Philippines and US, then mutual disengagement is next. US think tanks propose that, in light of President Duterte's pivot away from America. Example is the analysis, "America Should Drop Philippines Alliance: Thank Rodrigo Duterte for Encouraging Divorce," by Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, published in Forbes, Oct. 20, 2016. Excerpts:

"Philippine President Duterte is making a state visit to what until recently had been his nation's 'Great Satan': China. As the Obama administration pivoted to Asia, the Duterte administration is pivoting from the US. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi greeted Duterte in Beijing: 'This is a historic visit and presents an opportunity for relations between China and the Philippines to restart on a fresh, positive footing.'

"The prospect of a changed relationship worries Washington, but actually would be to America's advantage. The 'mutual' defense pact between the US and Manila is a bad deal for Washington, which should use the Duterte shock as an opportunity to replace the alliance with

much looser cooperation on shared interests. In particular, the US should leave confrontation with Beijing over contested territorial claims to Manila.

“The US collects allies like most people accumulate Facebook friends. The Philippines is a good example...

“Washington [i]s heavily involved in Filipino affairs, providing Special Forces to help battle Islamic insurgents, materiel to augment the Philippine military, and foreign aid to alleviate poverty. But the relationship [i]s an alliance in name only.

“The Philippines is a military nullity. The country brings to mind the Imperial German officer who after viewing maneuvers by the Austro-Hungarian army exclaimed: ‘My God, we are allied with a corpse.’

“The Philippine armed forces long focused on internal security. Eight years ago Gen. Alexander B. Yano, Philippine army chief of staff, complained about ‘deficient’ capability and an inability to ‘really defend all these areas because of a lack of equipment.’ Yet even today the Philippines devotes less than one percent of its GDP to the armed forces, which is a tiny fraction of what the People’s Republic of China spends. The International Institute for Strategic Studies explained that for decades ‘perennially low defense budgets have thwarted efforts to develop any significant capacity for conventional war fighting or deterrence.’

“For a country determined to confront Beijing at sea, the Filipino navy is a particular disappointment. Explained journalist Joseph Trevithick: ‘The archipelago’s sailing force is made up of half-century-old-antiques – and is falling apart.’ In fact, the navy’s three finest ships are retired US Coast Guard cutters. The flagship Gregorio del Pilar will be a half century old next year. No wonder IISS warned that ‘it remains unlikely that the Philippines will be able to provide more than a token national capability to defend its maritime claims.’

“Washington should emphasize that it has decided to update the relationship to reflect current realities, not punish Duterte.

“Under the circumstances Philippine officials continue to do what comes naturally: seek to borrow America’s military.

“The alliance was negotiated shortly after World War II, when many Asians still feared a Japanese military revival, and the US and Soviet Union were locked in a global struggle for dominance. Today no one threatens Philippine independence. And the unlikely conquest of the Philippines, while a humanitarian travesty, would not threaten American security. Washington has no reason to defend the Philippines proper, let alone distant and contested pieces of rock such as Scarborough Shoal.

Yet Pentagon bureaucrats are attracted to bases like moths to a flame. “The military never lost its desire to regain facilities in the Philippines. In 2014 the two governments signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, set to run for a decade, which authorized joint training missions, offered multiple base access for US forces, and prepositioned American military equipment.

“Although emergency basing rights have value, they are modest: Washington should be intervening much less in other nations’ disputes. The price for such a benefit should be equally modest, and certainly should not include a promise to go to war.

“However, the latter is what Manila desperately desires, at least until Duterte’s election. Barely six years after Clark and Subic closed, the Philippines agreed to a visiting forces agreement for U.S. military personnel. American advisers arrived shortly thereafter. The last government was particularly enthusiastic about promoting joint exercises.

“Beijing recognized Manila’s objective. Chinese state media concluded of EDCA: ‘The Aquino administration has made its intention clear: to confront China with US backing.’ In April Philippine Defense Secretary Gazmin declared that Americans ‘with their presence here, will deter uncalled for actions by the Chinese...’

“But why would US officials be so mad as to go to war with Beijing over Philippine fishing rights?” (For the complete text, see <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/america-should-drop-philippines-alliance-thank-rodriigo-duterte-encouraging>)