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U.S. should stay out of the China-Philippines spat

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was elected playing the tough guy. Now he's threatening a "reckoning" with China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal. Unfortunately, military misadventure by Manila could drag the United States and its other allies into a catastrophic conflict over Filipino interests of minimal importance to America.

China is at odds with many of its East Asian neighbors over control of islands, smaller rocks and waters throughout East Asia. Among the bitterest spats is between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal/Huangyan Island, which Beijing seized in 2012.

Unable to respond militarily, Manila took China to court and in July an international tribunal ruled for the Philippines. However, China refused to participate in the case and has shown no inclination to retreat.

Duterte is open to talks, he explained, but only based on "that arbitral judgment." Yet he recognized that China might reject this approach and seemed ready for conflict.

He announced that "there will come a time that we will have to do some reckoning about this." Indeed, he blustered: "I guarantee to them, if you are the ones who enter here, it will be bloody and we will not give it to them easily. It will be the bones of our soldiers and even my own."

Still, the U.S. would have little at stake if it simply acted as a bystander. But in Duterte's imagined reckoning, he almost certainly doesn't expect most of the blood to come from Filipinos. Rather, that's where Americans are supposed to come in.

After all, Manila doesn't have much of a military. The Philippines spends less than 1 percent of GDP on defense. Concluded the International Institute for Strategic Studies, despite U.S. arms transfers "it remains unlikely that the Philippines will be able to provide more than a token national capability to defend its maritime claims."

That is why Manila wants to borrow the U.S. military in any conflict. The two nations purport to be allies under the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. Alas, the pact is "mutual" in name only. The Philippines' only job is to let America defend it.

Moreover, there's no reason to believe that an accord reached 65 years ago has much relevance in today's world. The U.S. no longer has reason to defend a distant nation of minimal security importance to America, and especially that country's territorial claims.

But U.S. officials apparently believe that they can deter China on the cheap, in this case by issuing an ambiguous commitment that China (and no other foreign government) would dare challenge. However, Beijing is unlikely to believe that America is prepared to fight a nuclear power in order to return Scarborough Shoal to Manila's control.

Despite Philippine pressure for a liberal interpretation of the "Mutual" Defense Treaty, the Obama administration has avoided explicitly committing itself to protect Scarborough Shoal. So Manila long has sought to use other agreements to tie America to its defense and ensnare America in its dispute with China.

For instance, in 2014 Washington and Manila signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. However worthwhile base access and other activities may be — America should be intervening less, not more, around the world — they do not require a U.S. security guarantee. But in April the Obama administration announced that it would send more aircraft and personnel to rotate through the Philippines while conducting joint air and naval patrols with Filipino forces.

Although U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said Washington was "trying to tamp down tensions," then-Philippine Defense Secretary Gazmin was more forthright: The Americans "with their presence here, will deter uncalled for actions by the Chinese." The leader of a fishing village told Associated Press that "the presence of America will make China think twice."

Actually, not likely unless Beijing believes Washington's leaders have lost their collective mind. The Philippines matters little for U.S. security. Confronting a nationalistic nuclear armed power over Scarborough Shoal or similar disputed territories would be madness.

Of course, Beijing also should not want a conflict. But for China control of nearby territories and waters is an important if not vital interest; preventing America from dominating China's border areas is even more so. Imagine how Americans would react if the Chinese Navy treated the Caribbean and waters along the U.S. eastern seaboard as a Chinese lake.

If Manila wants to defend its interest against the region's most important power, it should create a military capable of doing so. If other Asian nations want to get involved, that would be their decision. But if the China-Philippines dispute reaches the "reckoning" predicted by Duterte, then let it be Filipino rather than American forces that do the bleeding.

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