



The Philippines Versus China: U.S. Should Let Manila Fight Its Own War

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Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was elected playing the tough guy. Since taking office he has encouraged the lawless killing of accused drug dealers. Now he's threatening a "reckoning" with China over the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Encouraging extra-judicial murder is dubious business for any government, but is minor league compared to threatening war against the People's Republic of China, which possesses the world's third most powerful armed forces. Military misadventure by Manila could drag the U.S. into a catastrophic conflict over Filipino interests of minimal importance to America.

As if to emphasize its willingness to meet Duterte's challenge, the PRC stationed ten ships in waters claimed by Manila while hosting the G20 summit, attended by President Barack Obama. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana responded: "If they try to construct anything in Scarborough, it will have [a] far-reaching adverse effect."

China was enfeebled for decades. Decrepit imperial rule left the nation vulnerable to depredations by the West. A weak republic was bedeviled by regional warlords and brutalized by Japanese aggression. The revolutionary Communist regime fell out with the Soviet Union and suffered through domestic blood-letting. When internal peace finally came the impoverished state had little choice but to emphasize its "peaceful rise."

Now such restraint is a thing of the past, especially when it comes to territorial claims that Beijing long had no effective way to assert. The PRC 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 the PRC to court: in July an international tribunal ruled for the Philippines in almost every particular. However, China refused to participate in the case and denounced the ruling afterwards. Since then Beijing has shown no inclination to retreat.

During the recent Filipino election campaign Duterte indicated his desire for a peaceful resolution of the controversy and criticized Washington's intervention in Manila's affairs. Since then he has grown more belligerent. He is open to talks, he explained, but only based on the judicial ruling: his government would insist on "that arbitral judgment." (So would his neighbors, he predicted.) This would "be my platform. We do not go out of the four corners of this document."

Yet he recognized that China might reject this approach. If the diplomatic option was unsuccessful, "where do we go," he asked? Good question.

Duterte 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."

Duterte is not the only Filipino official talking tough. Last week an associate supreme court justice suggested taking additional legal steps, such as seeking the suspension of China's right to explore for resources on the continental shelf and ocean seabed under the Law of the Sea Treaty. The previous foreign minister made a thinly veiled appeal for the U.S. to "stop" the PRC's maritime activities.

Of course, Duterte insisted that "We are all for peace. I do not want to ignite anything there." But tossing ultimatums at the Chinese government, especially one angered by the tribunal decision, sensitive to nationalistic pressures at home, and determined not to show weakness abroad, is a dubious strategy to maintain the peace.

Still, the U.S. would have little at stake if it simply acted as a bystander to any conflagration. 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 country's limited armed forces focus on internal security. Earlier this year the International Institute for Strategic Studies reported that for decades "perennially low defense budgets have thwarted efforts to develop any significant capacity for conventional war fighting or deterrence." Years ago the country's defense minister described a navy which couldn't sail and an air force which couldn't fly. In 2008 Gen. Alexander B. Yano, the Philippine army's chief of staff, complained about "deficient" capability and an inability to "really defend all these areas because of a lack of equipment."

Improvements since then have been modest at best. Although military outlays have risen in recent years, Manila still spends less than one percent of GDP on defense. In 2012 the legislature

passed the AFP Modernization Act, but expenditures have not been sufficient to fund planned procurement.

The navy, in particular, remains in pitiful condition. Two years ago defense journalist Joseph Trevithick warned that “The archipelago’s sailing force is made up of half-century-old-antiques—and is falling apart.” The navy’s three best vessels, including its flagship, the BRP Gregorio del Pilar, are cast-off U.S. Coast Guard cutters. The Gregorio del Pilar was originally commissioned *in 1967*, shortly after Mao Zedong plunged China into the Cultural Revolution.

The website www.globalfirepower.com ranks the Filipino military 14th in the region. China is number two, after Russia (which deploys most of its forces to the east). However, the gap is far larger than suggested by the distance of 12 rankings: the PRC military spends upwards of 100 times as much, maintains 200 times as many personnel, and deploys nearly ten times as many ships (including an aircraft carrier and submarines, which the Philippines lacks). Although no one would expect Manila to defeat the PRC in war, the former falls well short of achieving even the more modest objective articulated by Major-General Raul de Rosario, to give China “a bloodied nose” in any fight. Concluded IISS, 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.”

Manila’s inability to confront China in a real war is why the former wants to borrow the U.S. military in any conflict. Philippine Foreign Minister Perfecto Yasay declared last month that desire for good relations with China “does not mean that we’ll weaken our friendship with the United States.” (President Duterte’s recent public spat with President Obama won’t change that policy.)

Unfortunately, American officials play along. In April Defense Secretary Ash Carter called the U.S.-Philippines alliance “a cornerstone of peace and stability in the region.” However, one is reminded of the imperial German army officer who remarked, after watching military maneuvers by his nation’s principal ally, Austria-Hungary: My God, we are allied with a corpse. In describing the Philippines “military ally” is not what first comes to mind.

Yet that is what the two nations purport to be under the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1951. Alas, the pact is “mutual” in name only. Manila’s only job is to let America defend it. The Philippines obviously isn’t protecting the U.S.

Moreover, there’s no reason to believe that an accord reached 65 years ago has much relevance in today’s world. Unilateral security guarantees made sense for Washington in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The Soviet Union, an ideologically antagonistic military peer, posed a hegemonic, global challenge to the U.S. Geopolitics was a zero sum game, in which the enemy’s gain was America’s loss.

Today there is no comparable geopolitical struggle and the PRC is nothing like the U.S.S.R. Beijing competes sharply in a number of ways, including contesting U.S. domination of the waters of East Asia. But China poses no existential threat to America nor, so far, at least, *to any other state in the Asia-Pacific, including the Philippines*. The U.S. has no reason to defend a

distant nation of minimal security importance to America, let alone that government's territorial claims.

In 2014 Washington and Manila signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement providing for base access, prepositioned equipment, and joint training missions. However worthwhile these provisions may be—America should be intervening less, not more, around the world—they do not require a U.S. security guarantee. Bases should be a means to an end, such as defending America, not an end in themselves, justifying a security guarantee.

In any case, U.S. officials apparently believe that they can deter the PRC on the cheap, in this case by issuing an ambiguous commitment which China (and no other foreign government) would dare challenge. Unfortunately, if deterrence failed, the security guarantee would act as a tripwire, committing America to a war which would not be in the nation's interest.

However, Beijing is unlikely to believe such a promise, that America is prepared to fight a nuclear power in order to return Scarborough Shoal to Manila's control. Moreover, the Philippine's belief that America stands behind it inevitably encourages reckless behavior. U.S. rhetoric reinforces such a perception. Four years ago on the signing of a minor agreement regarding military cooperation, Secretary Clinton declared: "The U.S. will always be in the corner of the Philippines. We will always stand and fight for you to achieve the future we seek."

However, despite relentless Philippine pressure for a liberal interpretation of the "Mutual" Defense Treaty, so far the Obama administration has avoided explicitly committing itself to the defense of Scarborough Shoal.

Chinese control probably does not constitute the sort of "unprovoked armed attack" necessary to trigger the pact. Moreover, the treaty only covers an assault "on the metropolitan territory of either of the Parties, or on the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific." Scarborough Shoal isn't part of Manila's metropolitan territory, located in the Pacific, or acknowledged by Washington to be sovereign Filipino land. Even if the U.S. changed policy to take formal sides in the territorial dispute and use treaty dicta from the preamble (which refers to the "Pacific Area"), the agreement still only promises action, not necessarily military intervention.

Recognizing Washington's reluctance to confront the PRC, Manila long has sought to use other means to tie America to its defense and ensnare America in its dispute with China. Just six years after the closure of U.S. bases the two nations concluded a visiting forces agreement to cover American military personnel in the Philippines. Starting in 2002 Washington deployed troops to train and advise Filipino forces combating various insurgents and terrorists.

Four years ago Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin announced that he interpreted recent remarks by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to indicate that the U.S. would "cover our problem in the West Philippine Sea," meaning Scarborough Shoal and other contested territories. At the same time Foreign Minister Alberto del Rosario observed: "As part of building up our minimum credible defense posture, we would like the Americans to come more often." Moreover, he added, "Let's have these joint training exercises more frequently and on a bigger scale. As many times as we can, in different places if we can, that's the objective of the exercise."

Beijing recognized the game being played. Xinhua, Chinese state media, concluded of the 2014 agreement: “By striking the defense deal with the United States at this moment despite domestic opposition, the Aquino administration has made its intention clear: to confront China with U.S. backing.” In Xinhua’s view, “An emboldened Aquino would make an amicable solution to the territorial disputes more difficult, if not impossible.”

That almost certainly is the case with Duterte today. 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 village home to many fishermen who lost their livelihoods after Beijing grabbed Scarborough Shoal told the Associated Press: “This will boost the confidence of our fishermen because they think the U.S. has the capability to defend them. The presence of America will make China think twice.”

Actually, not likely unless Beijing believes Washington’s leaders have lost their collective mind. The U.S. wants to believe that the PRC would back down rather than risk a military confrontation, but the residents of Zhongnanhai have better reason to bet on an American retreat. Despite pious proclamations from various visiting American dignitaries, the Philippines matters little for U.S. security. Moreover, even a commitment to Filipino independence does not require defending Philippine control over disputed territories and waters.

Confronting a nationalistic nuclear armed power over Scarborough Shoal or similar disputed territories would be madness. Washington might believe it benefits from its recent unnatural domination of the Asia-Pacific, but the advantages for the American people are far from obvious and are not worth fighting a war to maintain.

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 the PRC’s border areas is even more so. Equally important is demonstrating credibility in facing down an adversary willing to intervene against other nations whenever a Napoleonic zeitgeist envelopes Washington. Imagine how Americans would react if the Chinese navy treated the Caribbean and waters along the Eastern Seaboard as a Chinese lake rightly under the Beijing’s control.

The “unipolar moment,” if it ever truly existed, is over. The U.S. remains the world’s most powerful nation but cannot act as global dictatress, unilaterally determining the course of international affairs. America’s interest is most often advanced by avoiding rather than courting conflict.

That includes over Manila’s claim to Scarborough Shoal. The Philippines appears to have the better case for ownership, but if Manila wants to defend its interest against the region’s most important power, the former should create a military capable of doing so. If the China-Philippines dispute reaches the “reckoning” predicted by President Duterte, then it should be Filipino rather than American forces which do the bleeding.

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