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Real change afoot in PH-US relations

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With a new US president certain to be elected on Tuesday (November 8) and subsequently inaugurated on January 20 next year, US Secretary of State John Kerry swore into office on Thursday the new US ambassador to the Philippines, who will replace Philip Goldberg.

The ambassador-designate is Mr. Sung Kim, formerly the chief US envoy for North Korea policy.

The thinking behind the appointment, I would surmise, goes like this. Mr. Kim, a career diplomat, will bring to his new position experience in dealing with unpredictable and prickly leaders, having already dealt with Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader of North Korea. President Duterte will be a lamb in comparison.

In our barangay, some are wondering whether we Filipinos should attach significance to this appointment, since in two months' time, President Obama and Secretary Kerry will be gone from office themselves.

If ever an appointment was designed to cover a void, this one was. Mr. Kim must prepare to patch a veritable crater that has opened between Washington and Manila, since president Duterte's accession to office on June 30 this year. He must prepare for a confirmation process in the US Senate that will test his knowledge and understanding of US-Philippine relations and DU30. And when he comes to Manila to finally meet DU30, he must brace himself for an interesting meeting.

At Kim's oath-taking, Kerry tried his best to sound positive. He expressed confidence about the future of the 70-year alliance between the US and the Philippines, despite the recent untoward developments.

He said: "Democratic elections bring change, and we must have the wisdom to recognize and adjust to that change. But the logic of our alliance and why we have stood together for so long, are as compelling today as they have ever been."

In truth, both America and the Philippines must seriously prepare for real change in their relationship, whatever the US election outcome.

Clinton or Trump, America is our friend

In Tuesday's balloting, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are given fair chances of winning by oddsmakers and pollsters. The race has become a contest on who is more distrusted or detested.

Decoding who will win depends on what media or network you rely on for information.

At home, we have an ongoing and lively debate regarding the US election. I like watching Fox News, which tends to call the race for Trump. My wife absolutely detests Fox, while I find CNN low-energy and boring.

Neither Trump nor Clinton has given much thought to PH-US relations during this election cycle.

In one report on their prospective foreign policies, Trump is quoted as saying that he considers the Philippines of "major strategic importance" to the stability and future of the Asia-Pacific.

Clinton, as state secretary, helped Obama craft his pivot or rebalancing to Asia. And she traveled the world to sell the scheme. The pivot is finished now.

Significantly, both Trump and Clinton have opposed Obama's proposal for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is a trade agreement among twelve of the Pacific Rim countries—which notably excludes both China and the Philippines – and is designed to promote economic growth and greater trade.

In response to the US-led TPP, China has spearheaded the establishment of The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank (MDB) specifically conceived for the 21st century. Built on the lessons learned from existing MDBs like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the AIIB will focus on the development of infrastructure and other productive sectors in Asia, including energy and power, transportation and telecommunications.

The initiative has gained support from 37 regional and 20 non-regional Prospective Founding Members (PFM), all of which have signed the Articles of Agreement that form the legal basis for the bank. The bank started operation after the agreement entered into force on 25 December 25, 2015. The major economies that did not become founding members include Japan and the United States.

Both the pivot and the TPP are now projected to die with the Obama presidency.

In this light, the naming of a new US ambassador to Manila is like a tree falling in the forest, because the new US president will surely name his/her own ambassador-designate.

A shock to PH-US alliance

President Duterte has been a shock to the PH-US alliance, in that he has shaken it to the core by declaring a separation from America, and drawing closer to China and possibly also Russia.

Some members of the commentariat in both Washington and Manila believe that this is all to the good because it will put ties on a new footing. Indeed, one senior fellow at the Cato Institute, Doug Bandow, writing in Forbes magazine last month, contended that America should drop the alliance with the Philippines, and thank President Duterte for advocating a divorce.

The Forbes article could not be more scathing and blunt. Bandow wrote:

“Washington sees Manila as part of a containment strategy. If war erupted between the US and China, the former would expect to use its Philippine bases, making them a legitimate target for the PRC even if the Philippines formally stayed out of the conflict. Officials in Manila likely would be unwilling to grant the US access to bases at the very moment when the Pentagon most desired to use them.

“The US should not respond by desperately reassuring the Philippines... An enhanced bilateral relationship would not make America more secure. The US cannot effectively enforce regional stability: Conflicts reflect manifold local and regional factors. Indeed, American intervention is often highly destabilizing—just look at Iraq and Libya.

“Moreover, Washington’s version of a good international order clashes with that of other nations, most importantly China. Americans who assume the PRC would yield might be badly surprised. The US may be stronger globally, but the dynamics of war favor Beijing in two respects.

First, events in East Asia matter far more to China, just as the US is far more concerned about Latin America.

Second, China need only deter America from acting. That costs far less than Washington doing what is necessary to defeat the PRC.

“It’s one thing to contemplate such a conflict to defend America. It’s quite another to loose the dogs of war in Asia on behalf of other nations’ peripheral interests.

“With President Duterte apparently determined to stake out a position at least equidistant between China and America, Washington should take the initiative. The US should end the ‘mutual’ defense treaty and negotiate a far looser agreement for security cooperation when appropriate. There should be no more extra aid and freebie weapons for Manila.”

It’s the kind of talk and analysis that should concentrate minds in Manila.