

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Is Manila Worth American Lives?

The Philippines might be a nice place to visit. But it isn't a nation whose security America should guarantee.

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August 4, 2019

Washington policymakers treat allies like Facebook friends, the more the merrier. Montenegro or the United Kingdom, allies are viewed as much the same. Administrations routinely ink another “mutual” defense treaty and pretend the result is a real military alliance, designed to make America more secure.

In fact, most U.S. “allies” are nothing of the sort. During the Cold War Washington’s principal objective was to prevent weak, war-torn, and/or failed states from falling under the control of the Soviet Union, and later China and North Korea. Although General and then President Dwight Eisenhower warned against turning the Europeans into security dependents, successive administrations ignored his advice. The U.S. inevitably took the lead and didn’t worry much about what its nominal allies did. They lagged behind the United States, failed to fulfill their commitments, and not too subtly took a very cheap if not quite free ride at Washington’s expense. U.S. officials whined on cue about the unfairness, but otherwise did nothing.

The allies eventually recovered economically, with Japan, Germany, the UK, France, and South Korea becoming important international players. Nevertheless, Washington continues to be overwhelmingly responsible for national and regional as well as global security. The presumption is that its alliances are essentially costless. All Washington needs to do to deter impudent adversaries is make an occasional threat or issue a pertinent demand. There’s really no need for allies to even possess weapons.

However, that world, which never really existed, is gone forever. Both Russia and China are well-armed and hostile; neither is inclined to give way to America. Smaller states, such as Iran and North Korea, have an even greater incentive to establish their credibility in order to resist Washington’s dictates.

Still, the alliances are supposed to deter aggressors. And surely they do to the degree that they are seen as credible. However, they have three additional, less positive impacts. The first is to discourage defense efforts by the country or countries being protected. NATO is a spectacular example. Even those nations which claim to be most worried about the threat of Russian attack spend barely two percent of their GDPs on the military, far less than the United States. Some European states, secure in their belief that America will do whatever is necessary, don’t even spend a percent of GDP on defense.

The second incentive created by an American defense guarantee is to encourage nations to be more aggressive, even reckless. Once the Democratic Progressive Party began winning elections in Taiwan, the U.S. had to worry that the new government would declare independence or otherwise challenge the People's Republic of China. It was a reasonable fear: when I visited during the Chen Shui-bian administration members of his government were confident that Washington would feel obligated to protect Taiwan irrespective of their behavior in a crisis. It appears that Georgia's government took a similar position in 2008. Although his country was not a formal ally, President Mikhail Saakashvili apparently believed the U.S. would back him after he launched an attack on Russian troops in secessionist territory.

The other result of alliances is to ensure Washington's involvement in conflicts involving other alliance members, irrespective of America's interests. In South Korea the U.S. long deployed troops along the Demilitarized Zone to act as a tripwire, ensuring Washington's entry into any war. Various "reassurance" initiatives in Europe are intended to have a similar effect, guaranteeing almost immediate involvement in any conflict.

All of these come into play in the Philippines, a dysfunctional state headed by a president irresponsible even by Trumpian standards, Rodrigo Duterte. Elected in 2016, he may be most noteworthy for his insouciant attitude toward the widespread murder of drug users and dealers by security forces. He came into office hostile to the U.S. and especially Obama administration, announced his government's "separation" from Washington, talked of aligning with the People's Republic of China, and suggested sending home American troops currently assisting Filipino forces against Islamist insurgents. (Duterte's minister of defense later said the relationship would be reviewed and suggested that his nation adopt a non-aligned foreign policy.)

However, that was then and this is now. When a Chinese ship rammed and sank a Filipino fishing vessel in June in Reed Bank, where Chinese territorial claims conflict with the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone, Duterte did little. He told his people that dealing with the PRC was a "delicate balancing act." And he warned: "A shooting war is a grief and misery multiplier. War leaves widows and orphans in its wake. I am not ready or inclined to accept the occurrence of more destruction, more widows and more orphans should war—even at a limited scale—break out."

His soft approach, even admitting that he had agreed to allow Chinese vessels to operate in the EEZ, led to calls for his impeachment. But then Duterte put a call into Washington, demanding that *the United States* send warships to confront the PRC: "I'm calling now, America. I am invoking the RP-US pact, and I would like America to gather their Seventh Fleet in front of China. I'm asking them now." And that's not all. He added that "When they enter the South China Sea, I will enter. I will ride with the American who goes there first. Then I will tell the Americans, 'Okay, let's bomb everything.'" Perhaps Generalissimo Duterte would like a nuke to ride like Maj. T.J. Kong in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

Others backed Duterte, though their rhetoric was less florid. For instance, Sen. Panfilo Lacson, an independent with his eye on the Philippine presidency, advocated formally invoking the alliance to contain China. The advocates of confrontation and maybe war appeared to be pushing on an open door. U.S. Ambassador Sung Kim said the "Mutual" Defense Treaty could be invoked in the case of "any armed attack" including by "government-sanctioned Chinese militia" against Filipino forces in the disputed areas.

Why should America go to war with the PRC because the Philippines makes territorial claims it can't or won't defend militarily? In fact, the treaty does not automatically trigger military intervention even in the case of an attack on the Philippines proper. Nevertheless, Washington is entangled with an ambitious but unbalanced authoritarian in political trouble. America desperately needs to cut commitments to such "friends." Better yet, the U.S. should use a Facebook technique and begin "unfriending" wastrel defense dependents, such as Manila.

The Philippines and the United States have a unique history. Washington seized the archipelago after defeating Spain in 1898 in a conflict nominally fought over Cuba. Then American forces spent more than three years crushing the indigenous independence movement, copying Spain's brutal tactics which the McKinley administration originally denounced. By mid-1902 the U.S. was in control, at the cost of some 200,000 Filipino lives.

It wasn't an obvious start of a beautiful friendship, but good feelings eventually won out in most of the islands. Washington granted self-rule and then, in July 1946, formal independence. Five years later Washington negotiated the usual sort of non-mutual "Mutual" Defense Treaty characteristic of the time. Then the agreement's focus was on the possibility of a rearmed Japan. The Soviet Union became the next threat, but it has since disappeared. Now the new "necessary enemy" is China.

The PRC isn't a good substitute for the USSR. China is more fascist than communist, and is not engaged in an ideological war directed at global domination. Beijing seeks to restore influence lost when the decrepit Chinese Empire was coerced by the Western powers, which means pushing aside Washington and its allies when necessary, not defeating them globally. The PRC's objective is to aggrandize itself, not destroy the U.S. As such, the Chinese threaten Washington's outside influence in East Asia, not America's existence and liberal political system.

Nor is there any evidence that Beijing hopes for physical conquest of its neighbors. Indeed, if there is a model for China, it likely is America's decades of domination of Latin America. With the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, Washington asserted its hegemony in its neighborhood. Physical occupations of nearby states were few, especially as international sensibilities changed during the twentieth century. However, the U.S. forcefully asserted its interest, even risking war to prevent Moscow from stationing nuclear weapons in Cuba.

The PRC probably hopes to establish similar control. However, its task is much more difficult. America enjoyed pacific neighbors north and south (after the mid-1800s). China is surrounded by nations with which it has been at war: Russia, Vietnam, India, South Korea, and Japan. Moreover, while Beijing is much larger economically than its neighbors, it faces far more serious competitors, including nuclear-armed Moscow, rapidly developing India, wealthy, well-armed Tokyo and Seoul, and growing Islamic Indonesia. The Philippines is much smaller and weaker, but the costs of occupying even such a state almost certainly would greatly outweigh any conceivable benefits.

Moreover, the archipelago's primary security benefit for America is a bootstrap: the regional presence yields influence, which requires presence to sustain. Washington wants to be the dominant Asian power forever but would be secure without doing so. And the cost of projecting power is much greater than of deterring the projection of power. The Pentagon recognizes the challenge posed by China's anti-access/area-denial capabilities. But taking the war to the

Chinese mainland, the most obvious response, would not only be more costly. It would ensure escalation, since the PRC could not placidly accept such attacks.

The contested territories, rocks in the case of Scarborough Shoal, matter even less. Ownership offers control of resources, most notably fisheries and hydrocarbons. The extra-national wealth would be useful, but hardly worth full-scale war. Who owns what is a matter that America can largely view with indifference. Perhaps Washington should backstop the independence of friendly nations, but that is very different than defending a gaggle of subsidiary interests.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration increased military ties with Manila, signing the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” in 2014. U.S. combat forces aided the Filipino military in battling Islamist insurgents. The Philippines requested logistical aid for forces confronting the Chinese military in the South China Sea. Washington increased the number of exercises and other military activities, and rotated surveillance aircraft through the Philippines. The U.S. also transferred equipment and provided grants, including for construction of facilities expected to eventually house American forces. Defense consultant Jose Antonio Custodio cited “an obvious bending” of the law, adding that, “The U.S. and Philippine governments have always found ways to liberally interpret the provisions of the existing agreements.”

If there was one administration likely to change U.S. policy, it would seem to be the current one. Almost unique among American presidents, Donald Trump maintained a bitter and extended rhetorical attack on the United States as the international chump. Nervous foreign diplomats from allied states ask me if he is serious about demanding higher host nation support and even withdrawing troops.

Yet earlier this year Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned Beijing against even looking harshly at Manila, lest war with America result. He declared: “Any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations.” Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. generously said his government would accept America’s word, which he interpreted to mean “we have your back.” The U.S. and Philippines also have a dozen projects set under the EDCA, as well as nearly three hundred other joint military activities scheduled this year.

Where is the “mutual” in this relationship? Someday Manila might allow the prepositioning of equipment which might be useful in contingencies elsewhere, but Washington has no shortage of bases in the region. If the U.S. ends up at war in Korea, fighting China over Taiwan, or defending Japan’s claim to the Senkaku (Diaoyu to the PRC) Islands, will Manila join in? If so, with what? Its naval flagship is a half-century-old American Coast Guard cast-off. The Philippines is not arming to deter and defeat Beijing. The Philippines is whining to get America to deter and defeat Beijing.

The greatest heat is generated by the battle over two rocks called Scarborough Shoal (Panatag Shoal to the Philippines and Huangyan Islets to China). Originally administered by Manila, the territory was seized by the PRC seven years ago. Also contested is Mischief Reef, on which Beijing has constructed military facilities despite its location within the Filipino Exclusive Economic Zone. And these are not the only territories in dispute in the region. China and Japan are battling over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan and the Republic of Korea are squabbling over the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima Islands to the PRC and ROK, respectively). Finally, Brunei, China, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam variously claim ownership of the Paracel

and Spratly Islands. The specifics of each case vary, but collectively such territorial claims have inflamed nationalistic sentiments in many nations.

Until Pompeo's gratuitous statement, Washington had been cautious in its expressions of support, generally speaking more action taken by unnamed parties in the Pacific. After all, there is nothing at stake that justifies America making Manila's contested claim essentially its own. And doing so inevitably creates bad incentives. The Duterte government has less reason to invest more in the military. It can confidently be more reckless and assertive. And thereby—intentionally or not—might pull the U.S. into a war with nuclear-armed China over an issue of no importance to Americans.

Indeed, in March Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that if the Trump administration did not clarify Scarborough Shoal status under the "Mutual" Defense Treaty, Manila might end the alliance relationship. Lorenzana explained that "It is not the lack of reassurance that worries me. It is being involved in a war that we do not seek and do not want." He added that "If the Philippines does not want to be involved in a war, it can opt out on that basis."

If Manila doesn't believe the contested territories are worth war, then why should the U.S. believe so? Far better for the Philippines to expand its defense relationship with other parties. Indeed, three years ago at Manila's request, Tokyo transferred two coast guard ships to the Philippines. India and Vietnam also could do much more to assist the Duterte government.

A separate issue of interest to Washington in East Asian waters is freedom of navigation. However, that doesn't warrant intervening in often convoluted territorial arguments. The U.S. has mounted Freedom of Navigation Operations, or FONOPS, operations in waters claimed by Beijing. Observed Pompeo: "I think the whole world understands that the Trump administration has made a true commitment to making sure that these seas remain open for the security of the countries in the region and the world, open to commercial transit."

Sovereignty questions are not paramount for navigation. Even in EEZ or territorial waters, international law recognizes a general right to transit freely. Nor is the PRC likely to end commerce which has benefited it and most everyone in the region. It would be different in wartime, but then all that would matter would be the respective navies' fighting capabilities.

How much naval power America needs to protect its interests is a matter of contention. Earlier this year author Mark Helprin complained that Washington must "alter the correlation of military forces in the Western Pacific, and indeed in the world, so that it no longer moves rapidly and inevitably in China's favor." If not, he warned, "the Pacific Coast of the United States will eventually look out upon a Chinese lake."

In fact, Beijing's ability to operate along America's west coast will be even more limited than Washington's ability to operate along the PRC's east coast. Nor have the Chinese demonstrated much interest in doing so, if for no other reason than projecting power in that way would be so expensive. China lacks nearby bases and the U.S. could load up the mainland with plenty of ship-killing missiles.

And if Helprin or anyone else seriously believe that America's Pacific Coast might be at risk, then it would be better to concentrate resources and money on defending the American homeland than the Filipino islands. Defeating ever-growing Chinese forces so close to their home would

require an expensive, exhausting, and permanent military expansion. One the PRC would have every incentive to match.

The Philippines might be a nice place to visit. But it isn't a nation whose security America should guarantee. The United States certainly shouldn't protect Manila's sovereignty over territories which the latter is unable to defend. Nor to let the authoritarian ruler of a decrepit government of peripheral interest to America decide when Washington should go to war.

The PRC is likely to pose the greatest challenge to the United States in the coming years. It is in Washington's, as well as Beijing's interest to keep that competition as peaceful as possible. America should not go to war for anything short of fundamental, even vital interests. None are at stake in the Philippines, let alone Scarborough Reef.

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