



The Philippines: America's Perpetually Useless Ally

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April 28, 2021

China has parked its fishing fleet in waters claimed by the Philippines. Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte has fulminated ineffectively. So far, at least, the Biden administration has declined to go to war on Manila's behalf. But the possibility remains so long as the U.S. foolishly guarantees Philippine security.

Indeed, some things never change. One is the limited value of the Philippines as an ally. Its people are friendly and welcoming – and quite pro-American. But it is a semi-failed state with a military to match. Manila is a sad example of how the US has picked up the old German habit of allying with the least stable nations possessing the weakest militaries – as Berlin did with Austro-Hungary in World War I and Italy in World War II.

In the case of Washington the prime useless partner is the Philippines. The relationship wouldn't matter so much if Manila didn't expect America to protect not only its home islands, but also every useless piece of rock claimed by the Philippines against China, such as Scarborough Shoal. If Beijing and Washington end up at war – a horrific possibility – the cause should be more serious than *the Philippines*.

Manila is as an American ally because of blatant US imperialism. The early Americans revolted against empire and eschewed overseas adventurism as they overspread the North American continent. However, the Sirens of Asia attracted Washington. After the US went to war with Spain, formally to liberate Cuba promoted by a simultaneously scurrilous and scandalous "Yellow Press" propaganda campaign, American forces seized the Philippines as well. Famed imperialists declared that the oceans made the archipelago contiguous, and thus an appropriate target of annexation.

Alas, the Filipinos had other ideas, having already launched a domestic independence movement. What followed was three years of ruthless irregular warfare, featuring "concentration zones," which US soldiers compared to Washington's veritable extermination campaigns against native Americans. War crimes mixed with starvation to kill 200,000 or more Filipino civilians. Resentment long lingered, especially in some Muslim-majority islands, such as Mindanao, where armed opposition to the central government continues. Even Duterte raised the issue, demanding the return of the famed Balangiga Bells, taken as war booty and which, he reasonably contended, "are reminders of the gallantry and heroism of our forebears . . . who resisted the American colonization and sacrificed their lives in the process."

Washington finally granted the archipelago's independence in 1946, after the Philippines' liberation from Japan. The US approved the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, which, like similar agreements with South Korea, Japan, and Europe (NATO), effectively ran only one way, committing the US to defend the Philippines. Four decades later a deteriorating bilateral relationship and volcanic eruption pushed America out of both Clark Airfield and Subic Bay.

The departure was long overdue. The archipelago obviously matters not at all to defending America itself. Washington would prefer that Manila rather than Beijing control resources and waterways in the region, but the practical impact on the US is marginal. Base access always is useful. However, no Philippine president, even one calmer and friendlier than Rodrigo Duterte, would likely make his or her nation available for American military operations against the PRC except to defend against an unlikely attack on the archipelago. Aiding America against Beijing would make the Philippines a permanent enemy of China, which will always be close by.

However, prospective bases attract the Pentagon like light attracts moths. So military ties were renewed 1998 with a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), dispatch in 2002 of special operations forces to assist against Islamist insurgents, and designation in 2003 of the Philippines as a major non-NATO ally, essentially a fantasy honorific based on the country's location rather than its military. The Obama administration pushed further with the 2014 Agreement on Enhanced Defense Cooperation, which covered equipment and financial aid. However, Washington still wanted more – including joint military exercises and use of Filipino airspace. Security consultant Jose Antonio Custodio charged Washington with "an obvious bending" of the pact: "The US and Philippine governments have always found ways to liberally interpret the provisions of the existing agreements."

More serious, though has been Manila's determined campaign to stretch American security guarantees to cover worthless but contested islands, islets, shoals, reefs, rocks, and surrounding waters which could result in war with China. For instance, the two countries currently are sparring over the PRC's stationing a couple hundred ships – which it unpersuasively claimed were fishing vessels sheltering from bad weather that no one else spotted – around Chigua, Gaven, and Whitsun Reefs. Beijing made Mischief Reef its own in 1995 and since added an artificial island and airfield. Also contested is Scarborough Shoal (called Panatag Shoal by Filipinos and Huangyan Dao by Chinese), a large collection of rocks and reefs from which the Chinese navy ejected Filipino fishermen in 2012. Naturally, helpless Manila whined that the US was an "unreliable ally" for not courting war by challenging the PRC's action.

Filipino-U.S. relations have only grown more tempestuous under Duterte, who makes Donald Trump appear balanced, thoughtful, nuanced, and stable. Duterte took over in June 2016, denounced President Barack Obama as "a son of a whore" for condemning Manila's murderous anti-drug campaign and criticized US military support for the Filipino military against Islamist insurgents in Mindanao. Even more dramatically, Duterte declared the Philippines' "separation" from the US and traveled to Beijing in search of aid and investment. However, the PRC decided not to toss away good cash on bad prospects, leaving a humiliated Duterte with little more than a few frequent flyer miles.

He then shifted back to the US, demanding support. Philippines Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana threatened to end the two nations' military relationship, which today commits America to defend the Philippines and Manila to be allowed to be defended, unless Washington reaffirmed its responsibilities. Despite his faux toughness and swaggering persona,

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo proved to be a soft touch ever ready to sacrifice American interests, proclaiming that: "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. was pleased to see Pompeo dutifully fall into line and accept Manila's view, interpreting Washington's policy as "we have your back." US Ambassador Sung Kim later explained that the "mutual" defense treaty covered "any armed attack," even in disputed areas by a "government-sanctioned Chinese militia."

That didn't stop Duterte from later proclaiming the end of the VFA, which likely would have ended any future joint military exercises. He decided that the Chinese "do not mean harm," at least as long as "we do not also do something that is harmful to them." A few months later all was forgiven, however, and the erratic Duterte shifted back, leaving the VFA in effect. Now Manila is demanding that China remove its ships from Philippine waters, so far to no effect.

Who but the US – or perhaps Germany last century! – would consider the Philippines as an ally? Manila's weakness long has been obvious to all, especially Filipinos. More than two decades ago Defense Minister Orlando Mercado said that his country had "a navy that can't go out to sea and an air force that cannot fly." Apparently the infantry could march, though what else it could do was not as obvious.

The world then was very different. Russia had disappeared as both a hostile and a Pacific power. The People's Republic of China was growing economically because of the dramatic reforms enacted after the death of the destructive Mao Zedong but was not yet able to challenge the US or the Asian order constructed by America in the aftermath of World War II. The Philippines' main enemies were domestic.

As the 20th Century came to a close Filipino military expenditures were about \$1.6 billion. Manila had 106,000 men under arms and another 131,000 in the reserves. The navy had one frigate, plus 60 patrol and coastal combatant craft. The air force deployed 47 combat aircraft and 97 helicopters. One almost wondered why the government bothered to field armed forces at all, except that it would be embarrassing not to have even a pretend military.

At the time, however, the Philippines didn't seem to need much more. The PRC wasn't much of a threat. It spent about \$40 billion on the military and had a lot of men in uniform but was then reducing its enormous number of poorly paid conscripts. China's economy was about ten times as large and military expenditures were about 25 times as great as those of the Philippines. Still, these advantages only yielded some 60 patrol and coastal combatant ships. The air force had 3000 miscellaneous combat aircraft, a wide variety not well-positioned for air operations against the archipelago.

How the world has changed.

Manila made some progress. The military budget was \$3.65 billion last year. There were 143,100 military personnel, with 131,000 people still in the reserves. There also was the one frigate, while patrol and coastal combatant vessels were up to just 63. The number of combat capable aircraft was down to 39. The number of operable helicopters had dropped to 73, with another 25 non-working. At least there were some new unmanned aerial vehicles.

Naturally, the Filipino fleet was less than state of the art. It included several American cast-offs, as well as a few former British and South Korean vessels. In 2018 the BRP Gregorio del Pilar,

the Philippine navy's flagship – another US hand-me-down, once the Coast Guard cutter USCGC Hamilton – ran aground amid the contested Spratly Islands, damaging a propeller and rudder. Parts had to be acquired from America and the ship was out of commission until late last year. So much for Manila's vast armada.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies is not impressed with Manila's efforts. Explained IISS: "Despite modest increases in defense funding in recent years, mainly in response to rising tensions in the South China sea, the capabilities and procurement plans of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) remain limited. The Philippines would still struggle to provide more than a token national capability to defend its maritime claims."

Far more significant – a vastly different level – of progress was made by the PRC. It now devotes about \$250 billion to its armed forces. There were more than two million men under arms and a half million in reserve. The navy had 80 principal surface combatants, including two rudimentary aircraft carriers, 59 submarines, and 179 patrol and coastal craft. There were 2367 generally more modern combat capable aircraft. IISS said of this force, the People's Liberation Army "is the world's largest armed force, with an increasingly advanced equipment inventory."

Even more decrepit than its military is the Philippines' political system which controls use of the military. Since the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 its presidents have included celebrities, incompetents, mediocrities, and populists. One chief executive was removed in a soft coup. Duterte, elected in 2016, has been notable for his hostility toward the US, willingness to urge the murder of drug users and sellers, volatile personality, and unpredictable policy shifts.

In June 2019 a Chinese ship hit and sank a Philippine fishing boat in disputed waters. For a short time Duterte contained his bluster, admitting that: "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." However, his bluster soon returned: "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." For what? He added: "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'."

This was an invitation to war that even the bombastic Pompeo rejected. Since then Duterte has been more measured. During a televised briefing in mid-April he acknowledged in reference to the presence of hundreds of Chinese boats that "If we go there to assert our jurisdiction, it will be bloody." Or, perhaps more accurately, that "nothing will happen" if the Filipino navy acted "because we are not in the possession of the sea." At least Duterte can count ships.

However, there will be more opportunities for conflict. Duterte indicated that he would order in the navy if China began to drill for oil: "If they get the oil, that would be time that we should act on it." He did not indicate why he thought acting in this case would yield a different result. Perhaps he hoped for backing from Washington, since the Biden administration appears to be adopting the confrontational approach of its predecessor to the PRC, including in Asia-Pacific waters. The spokesman for the Philippines defense ministry, Arsenio Andolong, said that "as the situation [in the South China Sea] evolves, we keep all our options open in managing the situation, including *leveraging our partnerships with other nations such as the United States.*" [emphasis added]

Last month as Manila ineffectively fussed at the PRC over the presence of Chinese ships, the US embassy announced that "We stand with the Philippines, our oldest treaty ally in Asia." Pentagon spokesman Ned Price similarly declared: "an armed attack against the Philippines's armed forces, public vessels or aircraft in the Pacific, including the South China Sea, will trigger our obligations under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty."

In mid-April the two governments held annual military exercises which were dropped last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the Defense Department announced, Secretary Lloyd Austin "proposed several measures to deepen defense cooperation between the United States and the Philippines, including by enhancing situational awareness of threats in the South China Sea," in a phone call to his Filipino counterpart.

Duterte's departure in 2024 won't end the threat of America getting dragged into a foolish fight. A less intemperate Filipino president might press for closer relations and firmer security guarantees. Yet America's security interest in the Philippines will remain quite limited – and something the PRC has not threatened, the archipelago's independence. That is very different from promising to defend contested territory which is essential neither for Manila nor America.

Washington's initial treaty guarantee was directed first against the possibility of a Japanese revival and only secondarily against the Soviet Union. The PRC is no adequate substitute threat. It shows no interest in imposing its hybrid system of Leninist state capitalism on the world or region. Nor is it interested in physical conquest of other nations, focusing its ill attention on territories considered to be historically Chinese and lost during the Century of Humiliation and succeeding years. In effect, Beijing wants its own Monroe Doctrine, dominating the region rather like America influences Central America and the Caribbean especially and Latin American generally.

However, China does not enjoy America's unique geographic advantages of vast oceans east and west and pacific neighbors north and south. Rather, Beijing has had multiple wars with its neighbors over the last century: India, Japan, Korea, Russia, and Vietnam. The PRC's aggressiveness has resulted in numerous own goals, with vulnerable neighbors welcoming India's entry into the region and Japan's increased activism. Even Manila, once hostile to a more assertive Tokyo, now welcomes it.

As convenient as it might seem for Washington to believe it is entitled to transfer its Monroe Doctrine to Asia, treating that continent, at least up to China's borders, as an American sphere of interest, doing so isn't worth the massive military cost necessary to do so and certainly isn't worth the much increased risk of a real war.

Instead, the US should facilitate greater allied cooperation. However, America's dominant role will always interfere with greater self-defense efforts. The promise of US intervention diminishes the need of allies and friends to make the expensive investments necessary for defense. Belief that the American cavalry will always ride to the rescue also encourages foolish wrangles over history, which today disrupt South Korean-Japanese military coordination. Without the U.S., such states would face more pressure to end their childish squabbles and focus on essentials.

The Biden administration wants to revive alliances. However, it is doing far more than improving a serious security relationship. Mark J. Valencia of the National Institute for South

China Sea Studies in Haikou, China, argued that "Biden's China policy is turning out to be a continuation of the Trump administration's, possibly trumping it in its hypocrisy, condescension, confrontation and militarism."

Indeed, before reviving alliance relationships, the administration should ensure that the ties are worth reviving. That with the Philippines is not. The two countries – their peoples and governments – should remain friendly. Their shared history is complicated but has brought them together. And both might benefit from security cooperation tailored to specific dangers, especially in uncertain times.

However, the Philippines is not a critical ally. Even Duterte appears to realize that. During one of his many blowups, Duterte's office announced that he "believes that our country cannot forever rely on other countries for the defense of the state." Yet he has done nothing to create a more serious military capable of the most fundamental task of any military, defending the society fielding it.

How to "revive" this alliance? Washington should drop its defense guarantee and begin negotiations to turn the faux mutual defense treaty into a real treaty of mutual cooperation. The US could help Manila through the transition in developing a serious military and defensive strategy. Perhaps then the two governments could finally be able to cooperate as equals.

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