

## Pivot from America

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During her recent visit to the Philippines, US Vice-President Kamala Harris reassured the Filipino people of her country's support for their rights in the West Philippine Sea. Like those of other American officials such as former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's, her visit once again brought into focus this country's continuing reliance on a foreign power for its external defense.

That decades-long anomaly — from 1946 when the US recognized Philippine independence to the present — makes every administration's claims to independence and national sovereignty at least partly unconvincing. That dependency is continuing despite a 27-year-old, billion-peso armed forces "modernization" program that has been ongoing since 1995, and the millions of US dollars in military assistance every regime has received from the country's former colonizer.

The 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of 2014 made the Philippines' reliance on a foreign power for its defense even more certain. Both pacts practically enable the basing of US troops and their weaponry in the country despite the Constitutional ban on foreign military bases on Philippine soil. Part of US military aid in fact goes to the maintenance and upgrading of those Philippine military bases to which US forces have periodic access.

Many countries are recipients of US military aid, but the Philippines is among those of its allies, like Taiwan and Korea, which have entered into one of the longest-running Mutual Defense Treaties (MDT) with the United States. Not only does the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty commit the US to the defense of the Philippines. It also makes the latter a party to any US response to an armed attack against it.

By in effect committing the Philippines, whatever its own views and preferences may be, to the support of US interests, the MDT is in that sense not as "mutual" as its name suggests. But Article IV of the treaty nevertheless presumes such a commonality of concerns by declaring that "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its Constitutional processes."

The latter stipulation is reportedly an "inside joke" in US military and defense circles in that they do not really expect the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to "return the favor" in the event of an armed attack against the US, according to the Cato Institute, a neo-liberal think tank based in Washington, DC. That view again denies the "mutuality" of the MDT while underscoring the

AFP's limited capacity to honor this country's treaty obligations and to defend the Philippines from any external threat.

That very same assumption was behind former President Rodrigo Duterte's accommodation with China and refusal to confront it despite its incursions and harassment of Filipino fisherfolk in Philippine territorial waters. And as recently demonstrated by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel's forcible seizure from a Philippine Navy ship of the debris from a Chinese rocket it had every right to salvage and was towing, that incapacity seems hardly debatable.

Ibon Foundation points out that in 2019 the Philippines received the biggest share of US military and security aid in Southeast Asia — \$54.7 million— and will continue to receive the bulk of such aid in 2023 at \$54 million. The total amount of US military aid the Philippines received from 2019 to 2022 is \$219.2 million. What makes that amount significant is the US' apparent recognition of the AFP's limitations, and the value it puts on continuing Philippine support for its strategic interests in Asia, which its tacticians very likely regard as the most steadfast among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Every public opinion poll ever taken has indeed found that, despite former President Rodrigo Duterte's rants against it and his threat of "separating" the Philippines from the US, it is still the country most Filipinos, presumably including their elected and other officials, trust the most. That reality has, among other consequences, made protests against the Philippine policy of ever closer political, military, and cultural relations with the US rare. If they do happen, they are studiously unreported by much of the corporate media, hence the near permanence and continuing enhancement of Philippines-US "special relations."

But while US military and other aid may be viewed as a reward for the Philippines' loyalty to its former colonizer, that does not preclude US hopes that its sales and donations of military hardware to the AFP could eventually turn it into a fighting force that could contribute to any conflict in which the US is embroiled. Although the US has deliberately developed over the past decades its military's capacity to fight multi-theater wars, it still encourages its allies and junior partners to be part of its efforts at "regime change," "peace-keeping," and dominance in many parts of the globe. A "modernized" AFP would presumably be in its interest, given the continuing deterioration of its relations with China and its multiplying problems with North Korea.

The "modernization" of the AFP has been ongoing since 1995, when an initial appropriation of P50 billion was approved by Congress under the terms of the Armed Forces Modernization Act (Republic Act No. 7898). Intended to last for 15 years, the Act lapsed in 2010. But the modernization program was renewed and extended for another 15 years during the term of the late former President Benigno Aquino III with an initial budget of P75 billion. It was specifically renewed to meet whatever challenges could arise from the country's problems with China and other claimant-countries in the West Philippine Sea. About P300 billion for the purchase of modern weaponry and equipment for the Philippine Army, Navy, and Air Force was also approved by then President Rodrigo Duterte in 2018.

Human rights groups opposed the program during the Duterte regime out of understandable fears that the equipment and weapons purchased under the plan would be used against the citizenry as part of the government's anti-insurgency campaign rather than to prepare the AFP to deter any external threat. That indeed happened in a number of instances in which some supposedly "rebel-influenced" communities were reportedly bombed and strafed by the "modernized" aircraft of the Philippine Air Force.

That issue demands the making of a clear policy on what military "modernization" means, specifically by including in its definition its departure from serving as the internal pacification force that it was created to be during the early years of the US colonial period when it was used to hunt down the remnants of the Katipunan, and it's focusing instead on external defense today, more than a century later. That re-orientation, plus the billions in US aid and in modernization funds available to it, could accelerate its long-delayed transformation from an instrument of the powerful few into its Constitutionally-mandated role as the protector and defender of the Filipino people.

It may not immediately lead to the Philippines' self-reliance in defending itself from any armed attack, but it could help the country to eventually reach the preliminary stages of that military development. Only then could the government review, revise, amend, or eventually abrogate the Mutual Defense Treaty and begin the process of weaning itself away from its historic and current dependence on a country with which the Filipino people may not always have a commonality of interests.