

US-Philippines Defense Cooperation during the Duterte Administration: Adjustments and Limitations

Ren Yuanzhe

In 2016 and 2017 respectively, new governments of the Philippines and the United States took office, which initiated a change in the development of their bilateral relations. Although the US-Philippines alliance has since then returned to normal conditions and defense cooperation has continued to strengthen, policy reorientations and adjustments by the Trump administration have stirred up uncertainties among the Filipinos concerning the ties between the two countries. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte came to power with the slogan of change. His foreign policy sought to actively close the rift in the relations with China, which were severely damaged by the South China Sea arbitration case. While tightening US-Philippines defense cooperation, he also took active steps to diversify cooperation partners. In recent years, a number of new features have been added to the US-Philippines defense cooperation, which not only reflects the characteristics and trends of the advancement of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, but also has important implications for China and its efforts to maintain overall peace and stability in the neighboring areas and to further enhance China-Philippines relations.

New Developments in US-Philippines Defense Cooperation during the Duterte Administration

Among the five US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, the Philippines has

Ren Yuanzhe is Associate Professor at the Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management, China Foreign Affairs University and a fellow at the Research Center for Beijing International Exchanges and Foreign Affairs Administration.

a relatively special alliance relationship with the United States. During the Cold War, the Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base were the largest US overseas military bases and the cornerstones of US front-line deployment in the region.¹ Although the Philippines abrogated the US-Philippines Military Bases Agreement in 1991, ending the 93-year-old history of US military presence in the Philippines, the residual colonial legacy and influence apparently still exists in the Philippines today.² From the late 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the United States once again strengthened the US-Philippines alliance out of strategic considerations, and the durable alliance has since “evolved from mere expedient and mechanical aggregations of national capabilities directed at a specific threat to something qualitatively different.”³ The Philippines has reduced its national defense investment since the 1990s, compelling it to rely more and more on the United States for security. Its security requirements from the United States can be reflected in its dependence on the US for protecting homeland security from the outside, maintaining domestic security, and for cooperation in the fight against terrorism and separatism. Traditionally, the US and the Philippines have close military ties, and this has a huge impact on the development of defense cooperation between the two sides. The two countries have established bilateral strategic and security dialogues such as the “2+2” (foreign ministers and defense ministers) mechanism, and the Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board (MDB-SEB). They have also regularly held joint military exercises such as “Balikatan” (shoulder to shoulder) and “Shield.” Especially after Aquino III became President of the Philippines in 2010, the US-Philippines defense relations continued to strengthen, and the Philippines was identified as a key link in the United States’ Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy. The US attempted to build a more

1 Walden Bello, *Dilemmas of Domination: The Unmaking of the American Empire*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013, p.36.

2 Ava Patricia C. Avila and Justin Goldman, “Philippine-US Relations: The Relevance of Evolving Alliance,” *Journal of Global South*, No.2, 2015, p.1.

3 Renato Cruz De Castro, “Linking Spokes Together: The Philippines’ Gambit of Harnessing the United States’ Alliances in Its External Balancing Policy against an Emergent China,” *Pacific Focus*, Vol.XXIX, No.1, April 2014, p.146.

robust political, military, economic and cultural alliance with the Philippines. In 2016, the outgoing Aquino government left Duterte with two major diplomatic challenges: first, how to handle its relations with China after the South China Sea arbitration case; and second, how to shape the future role of the US-Philippines alliance in view of the South China Sea issue.⁴ How to properly manage the relations with both China and the United States has become the core task in Duterte's foreign policy. After he took office, Duterte quickly adjusted the Philippines' foreign policy to that effect. Many scholars have termed his policy of handling relations with the two major powers "breaking up with the US and leaning towards China," arguing that the US-Philippines alliance has weakened during the Duterte administration. However, after examining Philippine foreign policy in the past three years, it can be concluded that a rapid development and upgrading of China-Philippines relations has been taking place in parallel with the deepening of US-Philippines defense relations. Duterte has been skillfully taking a pragmatic approach to strike a subtle balance among great powers in order to maximize the benefits for the Philippines. The US-Philippines defense cooperation has undergone the following three changes since Duterte took office.

First, it went from "temporary pivoting away from the US" to a steady development. It was within the expectations of many analysts that Duterte would take steps to change the country's China policy to remedy China-Philippines relations, which had fallen to a low level, but they never expected that he would turn away from the United States. A dispute on human rights issues was the main trigger for the turbulence in the US-Philippines defense relations. The Obama administration vehemently accused Duterte of human rights violations in his campaign against drug traffickers. In response, Duterte on several occasions even verbally insulted Obama and threatened to break up the Philippines' decades-long ties with the United States. In September 2016, Duterte declared that US forces would have to withdraw

4 Aileen Baviera, "President Duterte's Foreign Policy Challenges," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.38, No.2, August 2016, p.203.

from Mindanao in southern Philippines. In a speech given in October of the same year, he publicly stated that the Philippines would change its foreign policy because of abusive behaviour by the United States. He warned that the joint military exercise in the month may be the last one during his term, and that he had lost all respect for the United States.⁵ Shortly after that, Duterte traveled to China, becoming the first Philippine President who chose China as the destination for the first foreign visit. At a press conference during his stay in China, he announced that the Philippines would pivot away from the United States, and would downgrade their military and economic ties except societal interactions. He stated that in the long run, the Philippines must increasingly rely on China. Philippine analysts believed that Duterte's statements portrayed a very different image from that of a moderate reformist candidate in his campaign.⁶

Duterte did not carry out those announced changes in the US-Philippines alliance, instead keeping the Mutual Defense Treaty intact and US-Philippines military exercises and military exchanges uninterrupted. However, Duterte's conduct in his first days in office greatly affected the US-Philippines defense relationship, as compared with the period during the Aquino government. For instance, the United States were restricted from using Philippine military bases to implement "freedom of navigation operations" in the South China Sea, and the US-Philippines Amphibious Landing Exercise (PHIBLEX) and the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) were also postponed. Moreover, the Obama administration suspended the sale of assault rifles to Philippine police and threatened to cancel US\$400 million of aid to the Philippines, further worsening bilateral relations. Notwithstanding, most observers were optimistic at that time, predicting that the core agreements and relations between the United States and the Philippines remained unchanged, which laid the foundation for Trump to

5 "Rodrigo Duterte Says Obama 'Can Go to Hell' and Considers Breaking up with US," *The Guardian*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/04/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-tells-obama-go-to-hell>.

6 Richard Javad Heydarian, "Evolving Philippines-US-China Strategic Triangle: International and Domestic Drivers," *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol.9, No.4, p.577.

restart the US-Philippines alliance. They argued that the bilateral relations unexpectedly withstood the initial shocks of the Duterte administration and might even embrace a surprise turn in the Trump era.⁷ As expected, since the inauguration of Donald Trump as US President, the bilateral relationship has gradually picked up, and the main pillar of the US-Philippines alliance, namely defense cooperation, has been continuously strengthened.

Second, bilateral defense cooperation has made progress in both quality and quantity. The period during the Aquino administration can be described as the honeymoon of US-Philippines relations, when US economic and military assistance to the Philippines reached a record high. The assistance declined to a certain extent as Duterte made changes in his foreign policy during his early days in office, and so did Trump in his aid policy; yet the Philippines has remained the largest recipient of US military expenditures in Southeast Asia. According to data of the US Embassy in the Philippines, in the three years from 2016 to 2018, US military assistance to the Philippines exceeded 15 billion pesos (about US\$300 million).

The quantity and quality of US-Philippines military exercises are very meaningful indicators to characterize the alliance. According to MDB-SEB, the annual defense and security dialogue meeting between the two countries, the number of US-Philippines military exercises dropped slightly from more than 260 in 2016 to 258 in 2017, of which only six or seven were large-scale exercises. The figure increased again to 261 in 2018, and might rise to 281 in 2019. At the MDB-SEB meeting held in September 2019, the two parties announced that there would be more than 300 security cooperation activities in 2020, and reaffirmed that the strengthening of US-Philippines defense cooperation was the only solution to respond to current challenges in a changing world.⁸

7 Geoffrey Hartman, "Taking Stock of the Alliance as the Philippines Prepares for Trump," CSIS, December 1, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/southeast-asia-scott-circle-taking-stock-alliance-philippines-prepares-trump>.

8 "US and Philippines Reaffirm Alliance at Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board," US Embassy in the Philippines, September 13, 2019, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/us-and-philippines-reaffirm-alliance-at-mutual-defense-board-and-security-engagement-board>.

The “Balikatan” joint military exercise is a significant benchmark showing the degree of US-Philippines defense cooperation. The scale and subjects of the exercise may indicate the depth and targets of the cooperation. The 2017 “Balikatan” drill was downsized sharply, with only more than 5,000 participants. The objectives also changed from territorial defense to humanitarian aid, disaster relief and counter-terrorism. The exercise location was shifted from Palawan Island facing the South China Sea to Luzon in northern Philippines and the Visayas in central Philippines. The number of participants in the joint military exercise rose to more than 8,000 in 2018, and remained roughly on the same level in 2019, with about 7,500 soldiers participating, including 4,000 from the Philippines and 3,500 from the US. It was notable that the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp (LHD-1) from the US Marine Corps, and F-35B fighters were deployed for the first time in the traditional territorial defense exercise in the waters near the South China Sea. A US army officer declared that this exercise was a rehearsal of the Philippine armed forces to repel an invasion of Palawan small islands by foreign forces. This exercise shows that the US-Philippines alliance is becoming increasingly stronger, which may have an impact on China-Philippines relations.⁹

Counter-terrorism is an additional focus of US-Philippines defense cooperation. In the 2017 Marawi war on terror, the United States provided the Philippines with the most advanced surveillance and intelligence support, and dispatched special forces to help with the training of the Philippine army. According to information released by the US Embassy in the Philippines, in May 2017, US military helicopters delivered 200 Glock pistols, 300 M4 carbines, 100 grenade launchers and single-manipulators, and 4 Gatling machine guns, with a total value of 250 million pesos (about US\$5 million). Also included were 25 military rubber boats and 30 outboard engines worth 250 million pesos to support the operations of

9 Renato Cruz De Castro, “Balikatan 2019 and the Crisis in Philippine-China Rapprochement,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 23, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/balikatan-2019-and-the-crisis-in-philippine-china-rapprochement>.

the Philippine Marine Corps. In addition, the United States provided the Philippine Air Force with Cessna 208 aircraft with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities through other channels, valued at 1.6 billion pesos (about US\$33 million), along with financial contributions to cover auxiliary equipment and training. Although not directly involved in the war, the US army helped the Philippines with P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft to gather information and coordinate technical communications at Camp Ranao.¹⁰ After the defeat of the terrorists in the battle of Marawi, the Duterte government thanked the United States in particular, among the many countries that offered assistance, for its tremendous help in the resolution of the crisis.¹¹

Furthermore, the United States also focuses on improving the Philippines' law enforcement capabilities in the fight against terrorism. In July 2018, the US Embassy in the Philippines issued a statement in support of the Philippine government to eliminate the threat of terrorism by non-military legal means. To this end, the United States would offer 1.418 billion pesos (US\$27 million) to enhance the Philippines' law enforcement capabilities in response to terrorist actions through training and the provision of equipment.¹² At the eighth Bilateral Strategic Dialogue in July 2019, senior diplomats from both sides promised to expand information sharing, and improve port and aviation security to prevent terrorists from entering the Philippines, and to thwart any potential terrorist attacks on the Philippine territory. They would also work together to identify and crack down on money laundering in support of terrorist groups.

Third, there are signs of multilateral participation in the US-

10 Felipe Villamor, "US Troops in Besieged City of Marawi, Philippine Military Says," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/world/asia/philippines-marawi-us-troops.html>.

11 Frances Mangosing, "Lorenzana Thanks Partner Countries for Help in Marawi Siege," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 23, 2017, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/161038/philippine-news-updates-marawi-siege-marawi-liberation-maute-group-islamic-state-delfin-lorenzana-us-china-indonesia-australia-malaysia-brunei-singapore>.

12 Roy Mabasa, "PH to Get \$26.5M in US Assistance to Counter Terrorism," *Manila Bulletin*, July 20, 2018, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/07/19/ph-to-get-26-5m-in-us-assistance-to-counter-terrorism>.

Philippines military exercises. The changes affecting the US-Philippines defense cooperation are closely related with the recent transformation of the US alliance system in the entire Asia-Pacific region. During the Obama presidency, the US bilateral alliance structure in the Asia-Pacific began to show a clear trend of networking, which features security cooperation mechanisms between allies, significant increase of cross-country connections, and small multilateral cooperation between the US and its allies, and among the regional allies themselves. The “hub-and-spoke” system has turned into a crisscrossing web.¹³ This trend has become even more apparent since Trump took office. The “nodal defense” in the hybrid alliance system has become the core of the US-led regional defense system. It works together with various geometries of defense cooperation between the allies to tackle different challenges.¹⁴

US-Philippines defense cooperation has also shown some multilateral elements. Taking military exercises between the two sides as an example, Japan and Australia joined the 2018 US-Philippines “Balikatan” drill, each sending dozens of officers and soldiers to participate in all areas.¹⁵ In 2019, 50 Australian soldiers participated in the “Balikatan” exercise, while Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam all sent observers. Seemingly, the “Balikatan” exercise has gone beyond mere US-Philippines cooperation and is gradually being upgraded into a networking mechanism of US allies as well as strategic partners in the region.¹⁶ In the context of Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States and its allies obviously want to include the Philippines in the strategy, to strengthen defense cooperation with the Philippines, and build a trilateral, quadrilateral, or even multilateral security cooperation architecture.¹⁷

13 Sun Ru, “Networking US Alliance System in the Asia-Pacific and its Prospects,” *International Studies*, No.4, 2019, p.39.

14 Luis Simón, Alexander Lanoszka and Hugo Meijer, “Nodal Defence: The Changing Structure of U.S. Alliance Systems in Europe and East Asia,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, July 2019, pp.1-29.

15 Liu Lin, “2018 US-Philippines Balikatan: What Messages Delivered?” *World Affairs*, 2018, pp.30-31.

16 Prashanth Parameswaran, “What Does the 2019 Balikatan Exercise Tell US about the US-Philippines Alliance?” *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2019.

17 *Ibid.*

Why Has US-Philippines Defense Cooperation Re-energized?

Since 2016, the US-Philippines defense relationship has generally followed its tradition, but has incorporated some changes as well. Its development has gradually returned to the traditional trajectory, after having experienced a brief period of tensions during the late Obama administration. Despite Duterte's frequent criticism of the United States, US-Philippines defense cooperation has remained at a relatively high level with a steady development path. The Philippines did not turn away from the United States, and instead the bilateral alliance has been enhanced at modest but consistently growing levels. There are four main reasons for this.

Trump no longer accuses the Philippines of human rights violations, but rather emphasizes security cooperation

The Trump administration has kept a low profile on human rights issues, and shifted away from the Obama model of centering democracy and human rights in developing relations with Southeast Asian countries. In a telephone conversation with Duterte in April 2017, Trump congratulated him for his extraordinary achievements on drug control. After his visit to five Asian countries in November of the same year, Trump declared that he had established a "great friendship" with Duterte, and demonstrated a very different attitude on human rights issues compared to his predecessor.¹⁸ His approach was broadly criticized by policy research circles in the United States. Analysts commented that while Trump's trip to the Philippines was generally successful, it would convey to other allies that the US government supported the use of force internationally if Trump did not pressure Duterte on human rights issues. Even worse, disregard for this issue would grossly undermine the United States' long-term efforts to advocate human rights and

18 Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Lauds 'Great Relationship' with Duterte in Manila," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/world/asia/trump-duterte-philippines.html>.

democracy in the Philippines, a major stakeholder of US interests.¹⁹

While marginalizing the issue of human rights, the Trump administration obviously attaches more importance to security cooperation in the manner of “peace through strength,” by promoting US military power and employing military means in US foreign strategy. The United States puts great emphasis on developing defense relations with major Southeast Asian countries,²⁰ and the policy is rightly reflected in the improvement of US-Philippines defense ties. From the “free and open Indo-Pacific order” proposed by Trump in 2017 to the gradual implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the importance of allies, as represented by the Philippines, has become increasingly prominent. US-Philippines bilateral security cooperation has been incorporated into the framework of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. In August 2018, then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Walter Douglas revealed during his visit to the Philippines that US\$60 million of the \$300 million US military assistance to the Indo-Pacific region would be used in the Philippines, which reflects its strategic priority in Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report released by the US Department of Defense in June 2019 mentioned 12 defense cooperation agreements, including the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed by the United States and the Philippines in 2014. The implementation of the EDCA initially lagged far behind expectations, but it has gradually created opportunities for the further deepening of defense cooperation between the two countries. On April 17, 2018, US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim and Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana jointly announced the establishment of humanitarian and disaster relief warehouses at Cesar Basa Air Base in southern Manila, in order to store equipment for the two countries’ response capabilities to increasingly prominent humanitarian

19 Jessica Trisko Darden, “Trump’s Dangerous Dance with Duterte,” AEI, January 23, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/trumps-dangerous-dance-with-duterte/>.

20 Catharin Dalpino, “US Security Relations with Southeast Asia in the Trump Administration,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Vol.39, No.1, April 2017, p.4.

disasters in the region. It was the first project launched under the EDCA, which benefits both the US and the Philippines. US forces have thereby acquired a new base for its equipment in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Philippines has bolstered its disaster relief capabilities.²¹ The United States conducted the first fighter aircraft training in the region in February 2019, and the first joint airborne exercise with 500 US and Philippine soldiers was held in September of that year. In terms of aid grants, defense agreements and military exercises, the Philippines is playing an increasingly prominent role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. As one American scholar pointed out, “bold action to preserve the US-Philippines alliance is not only an imminent requirement but one that will serve the larger objectives of the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy.”²²

The Philippines needs US support to enhance its own defense capabilities

For many years, the Philippines’ military strength has been relatively weak in the face of a series of internal and external security threats. One crucial measure taken by the Aquino government was to modernize the Philippine armed forces and expand its capabilities. With the help of the United States, the Philippine government acted to upgrade its naval and air forces to improve sea situation awareness and maritime operational capabilities. These measures were specified in the two National Defense Planning Guides in 2011 and 2015. According to the EDCA signed by the two countries during Obama’s visit in the Philippines in April 2014, the United States is permitted to station troops on a temporary and rotational basis, while enjoying the right to deploy fighters and reconnaissance aircraft into Philippine bases. It is generally believed that, although the United

21 Prashanth Parameswaran, “Why the New US-Philippines Military Pact’s First Project Launch Matters,” *The Diplomat*, April 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/why-the-new-us-philippines-military-pacts-first-project-launch-matters>.

22 Gregory Poling and Eric Sayes, “Time to Make Good on the U.S.-Philippine Alliance,” *War on the Rocks*, January 21, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/time-to-make-good-on-the-u-s-philippine-alliance>.

States has not made new commitments on the South China Sea and other security issues of concern to the Philippines, “the EDCA provides it with a window of opportunity to work doubly hard on its defense modernization, with US assistance through training and acquisitions, toward the end-goal of developing ... ‘minimum credible defense.’”²³ The reform of the Philippine military aims at creating a response force to possible military conflicts in the South China Sea.

After Duterte was elected president, the Philippine defense policy showed a momentum of turning around, shifting the focus from maritime capacity building and external defense to internal security issues. Duterte publicly criticized the Aquino government’s plan of purchasing 12 FA-50 fighters, and cancelled some US-Philippines military technical cooperation programs. Ricardo Visaya, then Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces, said that “it [the modernization program] will continue, but items needed for internal security operations will be prioritized.”²⁴ Duterte further threatened to suspend the EDCA, asserting that it did not reflect the interests of the Philippines. This has brought uncertainties to the development of US-Philippines defense cooperation. However, the United States has been the top contributor to the Philippines’ military modernization program, and it would pose a great difficulty to change its heavy dependence on the US for military training and equipment. In May 2018, Duterte endorsed a US\$5.6-billion military procurement plan for the next five years, mostly including purchase of new frigates, anti-submarine helicopters, submarines, and multi-purpose fighters from the United States. The period from 2017 to 2022 represents the second phase of the Philippines’ military modernization program, a critical period linking the past and the future.²⁵ Duterte still prioritizes US-Philippines cooperation

23 Aileen S. P. Baviera, “Implications of the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement,” East-West Center, May 9, 2014, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb262.pdf>.

24 “AFP Modernization to Focus on Fighting Internal Threats,” *Philstar Global*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2016/06/24/1596205/afp-modernization-focus-fighting-internal-threats>.

25 Gregory Poling, “The Philippines: Modernization with a More Diverse Set of Partners,” *Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation*, RAND Corporation, August 2019, pp.293-323.

while also seeking a more diverse set of partners.

Developing US-Philippines defense cooperation has a sound domestic foundation in the Philippines

US-Philippines defense cooperation has been consistently susceptible to influence of domestic politics. The asymmetry of the alliance and the unequal positions of the two countries, changes in the Philippines' domestic political situation and public opinion, are all factors to be considered.²⁶ Specifically, the Philippine military has always interacted closely with the United States and is the firmest supporter of US-Philippines defense cooperation. Multiple Philippine military modernization programs have been executed under the guidance and with the funding of the United States. The US military has provided the Philippine Armed Forces with a substantial number of military training opportunities. A series of defense cooperation mechanisms agreed by the two countries, such as the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Visiting Forces Agreement, have enhanced pro-US groupings within the Philippine military. Duterte admitted to the media that "this is really their sentiment, our soldiers are really pro-American, that I cannot deny."²⁷ The Philippine military views China as a potential rival in the South China Sea and tends to welcome defense cooperation with the US to balance China's "military threat."

Public opinion in the Philippines generally supports US-Philippines defense cooperation. A 2017 opinion survey by the US-based Pew Research Center revealed that approximately 78 percent of the Filipinos had a positive view of the United States, and 68 percent believed that the US would assist them in their national defense.²⁸ A poll conducted by the Philippine polling agency Social Weather Stations in December 2018 showed that 61 percent of

26 Liu Lin, "Evolution and Prospects of US-Philippines Defense Relations," *Contemporary American Review*, No.1, 2017, p.65.

27 PiaRanada, "Duterte: NoDenyingIt, PHSoldiersArePro-US," *Rappler*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/inside-track/172687-duterte-philippine-soldiers-pro-united-states>.

28 "People in the Philippines Still Favor US over China, but Gap Is Narrowing," Pew Research Center, September 21, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/09/21/people-in-the-philippines-still-favor-u-s-over-china-but-gap-is-narrowing>.

Filipinos believed that if the Philippines were attacked by another country, the United States would provide military protection. Although the Filipinos' trust in the Trump administration has declined when compared to the Obama era, Duterte cannot ignore, when making policy decisions, that they have a strong sense of rapport with the Americans.

Similarities in leadership style partly disguise inter-state disputes

The ups and downs in current US-Philippines defense cooperation are closely linked to the personalities of the two national leaders. After Trump won the election in November 2016, Duterte has on several occasions expressed his affection for the US President, calling Trump and himself “equals.” Trump’s resentment for mainstream thinking, elite ideas, established systems, orthodox logic, and particularly his transactional approach to issues such as human rights, are decisive factors for the US-Philippines relationship to bottom out. Since the beginning of the campaign, Duterte showed a similar style to that of Trump, for which he became known as the “Trump of the Philippines.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said frankly during his visit to the Philippines in 2019 that Duterte was just like Trump. Duterte’s political style can be associated with his family background, political life, and personality. In the three years since he entered office, he has demonstrated a superb capability to balance power and use various political techniques. His populist approach, the crackdown on drugs and crimes have all catered to public dissatisfaction with the judicial system and the ruling class of the country.²⁹ Philippine foreign policy in this period has been stamped with the Duterte brand. Duterte has established a good personal relationship with Trump. Evidently, their similar political styles and close personal relations are based on their shared pragmatic diplomatic ideas, and it is yet unclear whether it will continue to affect US-Philippines defense cooperation.

29 Sheila S. Coronel, “The Vigilante President: How Duterte’s Brutal Populism Conquered the Philippines,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019, p.38.

Limitations of Deepening US-Philippines Defense Cooperation

By the second half of his six-year presidential term, Duterte had achieved visible progress in both domestic and foreign policies, for which he earned popular support. A poll conducted by the Social Weather Stations in April 2019 showed that 79 percent of Filipinos supported their president. Duterte was overwhelmingly successful in the 2019 midterm elections and began to take control of both chambers of the Philippine Congress, paving the way for further domestic and foreign policy reforms. If Trump succeeded in his 2020 re-election campaign, his basic ideas, principles, and policies concerning foreign relations would be unlikely to undergo major changes. With the unfolding of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the strategic value of the Philippines may be reinforced. However, the US-Philippines defense cooperation will also face a number of constraints.

First, it is difficult to predict the course of US security and economic assistance to the Philippines. Since the launch of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the Trump administration has attempted to bolster relations with ASEAN countries, because “ASEAN is literally at the center of the Indo-Pacific, and it plays a central role in the Indo-Pacific vision that America is presenting.”³⁰ The United States hopes to reinvigorate relations with allies in the region,³¹ and for this reason the Trump administration has proposed a series of initiatives and measures. On December 31, 2018, Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), a bill proposed by the Senate, which calls for the United States to invest US\$1.5 billion annually for the next five years in military, diplomatic and economic assistance activities to strengthen cooperation with its strategic allies in the region. However, the capacity of the US to commit such a high amount of strategic resources investment

30 Michael R. Pompeo, “Remarks on America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,” July 30, 2018, <https://asean.usmission.gov/sec-pompeo-remarks-on-americas-indo-pacific-economic-vision>.

31 “Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue Singapore,” June 2, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue>.

has been called into question. At a time when the United States is generally withdrawing from its international obligations and focusing largely on domestic affairs, its investment in the region seems inadequate to support its ambitious Indo-Pacific vision and reassure its allies. A recent report released by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) pointed out that the US defense budget does not at all allocate sufficient funds in the priority areas of national strategy, making it difficult to achieve the goals set forth in the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy.³² Coincidentally, in a study called “Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defense in the Indo-Pacific,” written by the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney, scholars also outlined that the US defense budget may not meet the requirements of the National Defense Strategy in the next decade. Having lost its military advantage in the Indo-Pacific, the US needs to establish a collective defense system, especially the capability to take joint actions.³³ Many studies have pointed to the decline of US national strength and the related uncertainties to deliver commitments to its allies. This is also the reason why the Philippine government frequently requests to conduct a review of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. Recently, one after another of US scholars have emphasized the importance of the alliance, expressing their concerns about the inadequate fulfillment of investment commitments by the Trump administration regarding its alliances.³⁴

Keeping high expectations on US-Philippines economic and trade cooperation, Duterte proactively negotiated bilateral trade and investment framework agreements with the United States, and asked Jose E. B. Antonio to visit the United States as his business envoy. Being Trump’s long-time business partner, Antonio played multiple roles, representing the Philippines’

32 Travis Sharp, *Did Dollars Follow Strategy? Analysis of the 2020 Defense Budget Request*, CSBA, August 2019, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/FY_2020_Budget_WEB.pdf.

33 Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone and Matilda Steward, *Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defence in the Indo-Pacific*, The United States Studies Center, University of Sydney, August 2019.

34 Michael Green, *Ironclad: Forging a New Future for America’s Alliance*, CSIS, 2019.

interests in its relationship with the United States and its President-elect.³⁵ This appointment has substantially enhanced the development of US-Philippines economic and trade relations. In October 2018, the two countries made positive progress in their consultations on cold chain facility cooperation, automotive safety standards, and agricultural product import and export, which contributed to enabling the United States to overtake Japan and become the second largest trading partner of the Philippines in the first half of 2019. However, in the long run, it is difficult for the United States to become a fundamental driver of the Philippines' economic reforms. In recent years, the focus of US business activities in Southeast Asia has shifted from the areas of infrastructure, real estate and energy to "soft sectors" such as financial services, information technology, pharmaceuticals, insurance and consulting.³⁶ These economic categories cannot address all the urgent needs of the Duterte government's economic reforms. Under the banner of "America First," the Trump administration has rolled back active multilateral trade policies and withdrew from agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The US "economic conservatism" has called into question its commitment to Southeast Asian countries including the Philippines. Despite being the largest US aid recipient in Southeast Asia, the Philippines has joined other Southeast Asian countries to express their disappointment at the overall reduction of US development aid in the region.³⁷

Second, the United States and the Philippines have apparent differences on key security issues such as the South China Sea, and the Philippines will not entirely follow the US. The South China Sea issue was the "glue" that held US-Philippines relations together during the Aquino administration, but for Duterte it is rather a "touchstone" to test their ties. Disagreeing with the Americans on the South China Sea issue, the Philippines are seeking

35 "Potential Conflicts around the Globe for Trump, the Businessman President," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/us/politics/donald-trump-international-business.html>.

36 David Shambaugh, "US-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Comparative Coexistence," *International Security*, Vol.42, No.4, Spring 2018, p.113.

37 Ren Yuanzhe, "Analysis of Trump's Southeast Asia Policy," *The Chinese Journal of American Studies*, No.1, 2019, p.56.

to strengthen security cooperation on the one hand, but to keep a distance from Washington's militarization efforts on the other. The United States and the Philippines do not always share common interests on South China Sea issues. Washington's medium-term goal is to support the Philippine military in fighting against terrorism, maintaining maritime security, and shifting the focus from domestic security to territorial defense. In the long run, the US hopes that the Philippines will assist it with safeguarding its key strategic interests in Southeast Asia, which is to ensure a balance of power favorable to the US.³⁸ However, the Philippines is alarmed about the escalation of geopolitical competition in the region, worrying that militarization will undermine the hard-won peace and stability in the South China Sea. The US-Philippines alliance will not be able to eliminate their differences on China, which might on the contrary be enlarged as the rivalry between China and the US in the South China Sea escalates and China-Philippines maritime cooperation expands.

The US-Philippines alliance is based on the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1951, but the applicable area of the treaty has not been clearly defined. During his visit to the Philippines in March 2019, Pompeo promised that the United States would act in accordance with its obligations laid out in the Mutual Defense Treaty, to counter any attacks on Philippine armed forces, aircraft, and government vessels in the South China Sea. However, Delfin Lorenzana, the Philippine Secretary of National Defense, was still laden with anxiety, indicating that the increasingly frequent US Navy activities in the South China Sea may involve the US in a hot war, a scenario that the Philippines did not want to get involved in. During his visit to the Philippines at the end of November 2019 after being appointed, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper reassured that the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty included the entire Pacific, including the South China Sea. He also expressed to Lorenzana his support to review the treaty, and that

38 Renato Cruz De Castro, "The 21st Century Philippine-US Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA): The Philippines' Policy in Facilitating the Obama Administration's Strategic Pivot to Asia," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol.26, No.4, December 2014, p.432.

senior US and Philippine defense officials would start consultations on amending the treaty.

Third, the Philippines will continue to seek a diversification of its diplomacy and reduce dependence on the United States. Since his election campaign, Duterte has consistently advocated an “independent and autonomous” foreign policy and diverse diplomacy. In September 2016, then Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay explained to CNN that “an independent foreign policy certainly does not involve isolating the country from the international community,” and the country “will continue to forge very strong alliances” with the US. A closer relationship with China does not mean alienation from the United States, and “we will pursue amity among all nations in a balanced manner,” Yasay said.³⁹ Jose Santiago Sta. Romana, the Philippine Ambassador to China, has properly summarized Duterte’s foreign policy aims. The first is to reduce dependence on America, but maintain their traditional alliance; the second is to focus on economic cooperation with China while looking for solutions to cool down maritime disputes; and the third is to improve non-traditional partnerships with countries such as Russia, Japan and India, while keeping ASEAN at the central position. The strategic goal of such an independent foreign policy is to find a suitable position in the geopolitical landscape between China and the United States, to be able to maximize and protect the national interests of the Philippines.⁴⁰

President Duterte’s destination choice for his head-of-state visits in the first three years of his presidency, which led him to China five times, to Russia once, and to Japan three times, fully demonstrates that he is seeking to diversify bilateral partnerships. Duterte has been seeking a diversity of diplomacy as well as of defense cooperation, as witnessed in the Philippines’ enhanced cooperation with US Asia-Pacific allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea. During Duterte’s visit to Japan in October 2017, the Japan

39 “DFA Chief: Independent Foreign Policy Is Mandated by Constitution,” *CNN Philippine*, September 10, 2016, <http://nine.cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/09/10/dfa-secretary-perfecto-yasay-independent-foreign-policy-mandated-by-constitution.html>.

40 Mico A. Galang, “US, China and Duterte’s ‘Independent Foreign Policy’,” *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/us-china-and-dutertes-independent-foreign-policy>.

Self-Defense Forces delivered TC90 trainers to the Philippines. At the end of his stay, Duterte called Japan a friend closer than a brother, and described their relationship as extraordinary. According to Secretary Lorenzana, Japan is also trying to sell the Philippines their latest radar systems. A “golden era” of Philippine-Japan relations has arrived.⁴¹ In addition, South Korea has become the second largest supplier of weapons and equipment to the Philippines in the past two years. In October 2016, the Philippines ordered two guided missile frigates worth 15 billion pesos (about US\$337 million) from Hyundai Heavy Industries of Korea, and in August 2019, a Pohang-class light frigate, delivered from South Korea to the Philippines, officially joined the Philippine Navy. This was the first time that the Philippine Navy has been equipped with a modern maritime combat ship, the first truly modern frigate in its history. Although the economic significance of Philippine-ROK military cooperation is more prominent, it is clear that South Korea has become one of the “most stable” friends of the Philippines.

Conclusion

The changes in US-Philippines defense cooperation during the Duterte administration are deeply affected by the evolution of international and regional strategic trends, and they are the natural result of the domestic political structure, pursuit of interests, and strategic adjustments of each of the two countries. After three years since Duterte took office, the ripple effects of these changes on the bilateral defense cooperation have gradually merged. In the future, there are practical and strategic necessities for both countries to improve their defense cooperation, but at the same time, each will take cautious steps to avoid getting entangled with sensitive security issues, in order to maintain an “optimal state” which is satisfactory for both sides. 🇵🇭

41 Richard Javad Heydarian, “The Golden Era of Japan-Philippine Relations Has Arrived,” *The National Interest*, June 16, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/golden-era-japan-philippine-relations-has-arrived-62572>.