



America's Moody Teenage Ally

By: Jose Antonio Custodio | August 7th, 2024



Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken pose for a photo with Secretary of National Defense of the Philippines Gilberto Teodoro and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo as part of the fourth U.S.-Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Manila, Philippines, July 30, 2024. IMAGE/ U.S. DoD/

There is much relief, especially in U.S. strategic community that the dreadful days of the Duterte administration are over and that the defense relationship with the Philippines has been restored to its previous warm and cooperative nature. The Philippines, under President Ferdinand “BongBong” Marcos Jr., has undertaken numerous bilateral military activities and exercises with its American allies. As if to make up for lost time, the largest ever Balikatan exercise was conducted in 2023 with 5,400 personnel from the Philippines military and 12,200 from the U.S. Many exercises between the two countries already concentrate on external and territorial defense thus moving away from counterterrorism and internal security that previously characterized these events. Sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement or EDCA were expanded to include four more in various locations of the Philippines in addition to the five previously agreed upon. These sites allow for greater flexibility for alliance forces in emergency situations and also increase the redundancy of Philippine facilities should conflict arise.

A protracted military modernization by the Philippines has allowed its armed forces to realistically participate in modern conflict simulations with its more formidable ally the United States. Supersonic combat aircraft, missile equipped warships, modern artillery systems that though in small numbers, still enable the Filipinos to gain experience in modern warfighting techniques. In addition, in contrast with most of its ASEAN neighbors and even with China, the Philippine military has actually used some of these modern weapon systems in combat against heavily armed Muslim secessionists. It is as if the Philippines is

actually living up to its side of the agreement on the aspect of the alliance and mutual defense.

However, these positive developments mask serious concerns that have implications for the alliance. The first of these is the lack of consistency of the Philippines as a treaty partner. Although it would be easy to criticize the Philippines for this, this lack of consistency is a byproduct of the country's colonial relationship with the U.S. where the Americans played a dominant role in Filipino life. This dominance was continued in the postwar era and was mishandled during the Marcos dictatorship from 1972 to 1986 when Washington aligned itself too much with the dictator. This cast a very negative light on the U.S. in the eyes of the new political elite which gained power with the fall of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. It then led to the non-renewal of the Military Bases Agreement in 1991 followed by the withdrawal of American military forces in 1992 from Subic and Clark.

Unfortunately, the Philippines had become so accustomed to the annual largesse provided by the U.S. to it that it was at its wit's end as to how to defend the country in the face of the rise of an aggressive Chinese presence that manifested itself so strongly in Mischief Reef. Hence, barely a decade after the unceremonious kicking out of the U.S., the Visiting Forces Agreement was signed that once again allowed American military personnel access to the Philippines in order to counter China. Although there were irritants that occurred between the two countries as a result of the renewed military ties such as criminal cases

involving several American servicemen, the fallout from the abrupt withdrawal of the Philippines contingent from the so called “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq, and the inadequate U.S. responses during the Scarborough Shoal standoff, the relationship was still fairly stable. These all went downhill during the Duterte administration which barely hid its pro-China sentiments. Of all the major allies of the U.S., the Philippines has got to be the most temperamental.

Contributing to the lack of consistency is the absence of a strategic outlook within the culture of the Philippine national sector. Decisions are frequently made not as a result of an exhaustive evaluation guided by the Philippine national interest but because of emotionalism and personal interests. When it comes to politics, the Philippines tends to be very parochial and displays an inability to think in broader terms. Case in point was the emotionalism that propelled much of the anti U.S. bases sentiment that led to the removal of the American military facilities in the early 1990s. Not a single one of those Filipino senators who voted against the renewal of the Military Bases Agreement took into consideration the possible effect that this would have on China that was already flexing its muscles in the South China Sea as early as the late 1980s.

Lacking a strategic mindset, the Philippines leadership finds it extremely difficult to craft an effective long-term strategy against China as it is bedeviled by an inadequate understanding of alliance dynamics and being stingy in defense investment. What is worse is that there is a common perception among Filipinos that frames the territorial threat from China as a rivalry between the

Chinese and the Americans and that the Philippines is just caught in between. This ignores the fact that even without the U.S. the Chinese will still pose as an existential threat to the Philippines because of its territorial ambitions best represented by the nine-dash line and the First and Second Island Chains. This tends to scare the Philippines into inaction and pursue the half-hearted measures it frequently does, since it persistently questions the reliability of American guarantees of support, while believing that China is all too powerful. The Chinese sense the confusion and fear among the Filipinos and become more dismissive and aggressive against them.

During the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the first decade of the 21st Century, it was her overwhelming desire to advance her personal interests that got her involved in scandals with Chinese companies. Her enabling of Chinese influence in the Philippines predated that of the Duterte administration. To try to frame the actions of many of these Filipino national leaders as being guided by geopolitical interests will end up making one ignore the more pernicious effect of their self-interest in the enactment of policies and programs.

The “best” example of personality driven policies was the Duterte administration. Due to his intense dislike for the U.S. and his affinity to China, Rodrigo Duterte derailed the efforts of the Philippines to face the territorial threat from the Chinese. He instead instituted policies that saw the Philippines appeasing China and disengaging from internationalizing the issue by setting

aside the arbitration victory, scaremongering the Filipino people that standing up to Beijing would allegedly result in war and being frequently unreceptive with the U.S. in defense cooperation.

Thus, with the return of cordial relations between the Philippines and the U.S. in the current Marcos administration, does this mean that what happened in the previous administration can be put behind and forgotten? The answer of course is a definitive no. The six years of the Duterte administration saw an enabling and strengthening of the influence of China in the Philippines that remains up to today. Rodrigo Duterte's daughter is the current Vice President, while within the legislature there remain key allies of Duterte especially within the Philippine Senate. Should anything happen to President Marcos Jr. while in office and the VP takes over, this warm relationship with the U.S. will change overnight to one very similar to the previous Duterte administration. This means that the capacity of China to influence and stage a comeback in the Philippines is even better than what it had going for it in 2016 when Rodrigo Duterte won the elections.

As the Marcos administration faces off against China, it also has to contend with internal attempts to disrupt his policies and actions from pro-Chinese elements mainly coming from the Duterte camp. A widespread pro-China social media campaign conducted by that camp replicates the fear mongering that was characteristic of the previous administration. With the collapse of the alliance between the Dutertes and the Marcoses, the former has

taken to characterize the latter as a bumbling weak administration that is leading the country to ruin. Interestingly enough, the rhetoric is similar to pro-Russian propaganda being directed against Ukraine and in fact uses the conflict there as a scare tactic against the Filipino people. The Duterte camp does not just do these actions to advance the interests of China, but more importantly to seize political power once again in the Philippines. Barring a premature death of Marcos Jr. brought about naturally or otherwise, the obvious path to power is still the electoral process making the 2025 mid-term elections and 2028 national elections crucial to both sides. As Marcos Jr. is only limited to one term, it is important that his successor will be able to take on the challenge of the Dutertes and the pro-China camp and win the elections. If that candidate fails, it may bring about an irredeemable crippling of the alliance between the U.S. and the Philippines. This is still a possibility since in recent polls, the Dutertes and their allies are still popular among the Filipino electorate.

Author's Bio

Jose Antonio Custodio is a security and defense consultant. He specializes in military history and has taken post-graduate studies in history from the University of the Philippines. He has taught, written, and commented in media on these topics on numerous occasions and he is a fellow at the Consortium of Indo Pacific Researchers.