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The US-Philippine history and relations date back to the Spanish-American War. Eventually, a formal alliance formed between the two countries providing access for US forces into the Philippines. This alliance allowed the US to provide military and economic support to the Philippines while projecting US power in Southeast Asia. This balancing strategy between both nations came to a halt when Duterte abrogated the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US on February 11, 2020. If there is no negotiation between Duterte and Trump by August, US forces will no longer engage in training and exercises in the Philippines. Aware of China's growth, Duterte sides with the country he deems is the winner. His bandwagoning strategy with the PRC impacts the US' security capabilities, credibility, and future operations in the region. The destabilization of the US-Philippine relations resulting from Duterte's economic negotiations and diplomatic actions in favor of China poses major implications for the US as it seems to be losing its ally and presence in East Asia. Given these possible outcomes, the US-Philippine security alliance may require US to use all instruments of power in convincing Duterte to realign with the US.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**TITLE: THE DESTABILIZATION OF THE US-PHILIPPINE RELATIONS:
ABROGATION OF THE VFA, PRESIDENT DUTERTE, AND CHINESE POWER**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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Executive Summary

Title: The Destabilization of the US-Philippine Relations: President Duterte, Unresolved Territorial Disputes, and Chinese Power

Author: Captain Armejoy Koontz, United States Army

Thesis: The destabilization of the US-Philippine relations resulting from Duterte's economic negotiations and diplomatic actions in favor of China poses major implications for the US as it seems to be losing its ally and presence in East Asia. Given these possible outcomes, the US-Philippine security alliance may require US to use all instruments of power in convincing Duterte to realign with the US.

Discussion: The US-Philippine history and relations date back to the Spanish-American War. Eventually, a formal alliance formed between the two countries providing access for US forces into the Philippines. This alliance allowed the US to provide military and economic support to the Philippines while projecting US power in Southeast Asia. This balancing strategy between both nations came to a halt when Duterte abrogated the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US on February 11, 2020. If there is no negotiation between Duterte and Trump by August, US forces will no longer engage in training and exercises in the Philippines. Duterte's disregard of the rule of law and personal animosity towards the US also contribute to the sudden shift of the Philippines foreign policy closer to the PRC. Aware of China's growth, Duterte sides with the country he deems is the winner. His bandwagoning strategy with the PRC impacts the US' security capabilities, credibility, and future operations in the region.

Conclusion: If the US intends for the Philippines to remain as its strategic partner and avoid an open war with the PRC, then the US needs to consider a better strategy to entice the Philippines overcoming the PRC's support. The US must use all its instruments of power to convince the Philippines to realign its foreign policy with the US. His successor must be the focal point when considering this strategy. Moreover, the US risks the possibility of Chinese increasing influence in the country, especially with the abrogation of the VFA. If time is of the essence, the US will have to consider another option.

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Preface

I chose this research topic because I have family members that reside in the Philippines. The US influence on the Philippines is evident in the Filipino culture, language, and history. The shift of the Philippines towards the PRC concerns me regarding the future of my family in the Philippines and the implications on the US military. As a military professional, I must also be aware of foreign policies to better understand operational environments.

I would like to thank Dr. Eric Shibuya as he provided me mentorship with this study. I would also like to thank LtCol Patrick Eldridge, Dr. Christopher Stowe, and Dr. Douglas Streusand for helping me with my researching, reading, and writing skills. I am fortunate to be married to CW3 Ben Koontz, who has been taking care of our daughter Emma as I pursue this humbling professional and personal development with the Marines. Lastly, I would like to thank my Dad for teaching me the meaning of sacrifice.

Introduction

On February 11, 2020, the Philippine government notified the US embassy in Manila that the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that was signed in 1999 will terminate in 180 days, unless both countries “agree to keep it.”¹ By August 2020, the US military will more likely no longer conduct training or exercises in the Philippines. The VFA stemmed from the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951. Troubled by the Japanese invasion during World War II (WWII), the Philippine government signed the MDT with the US “formalizing ties that had existed for decades with several military facilities in the Philippines providing *de facto* and *de jure* security guarantees to the former US colony.”² The US also utilized these military bases to fight its own wars, especially the Cold War, and conducted humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) missions around the region. In 1991, the MDT was suspended because the Philippines requested for “higher financial compensation” from the US, and the volcano Mount Pinatubo erupted causing the evacuation of Clark Air Force Base.³ Furthermore, the Cold War had ended and the Subic Naval Base served little purpose, which all accelerated the US forces’ exit from the Philippines.

Signed on April 28, 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was an update to the MDT providing the US military access to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) facilities.⁴ Since the Filipino Constitution barred permanent basing of foreign military, EDCA provided access for the US military into the Philippines. EDCA also identified goals for

¹ Jim Gomez, “Philippines notifies US of intent to end major security pact,” The Associated Press, February 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/969de0066e93fbc26a4e258b7b7eca1d>.

² Renato Cruz de Castro, “Philippine Strategic Culture: Continuity in the Face of Changing Regional Dynamics,” in *Strategic Cultures and Security Policies in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. by Jeffrey S. Lantis (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 87.

³ Armando Heredia, “New Defense Agreement Between the Philippines and the U.S.: The Basics,” US Naval Institute News, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/03/22/analysis-new-u-s-philippine-basing-deal-heavy-on-air-power-light-on-naval-support>.

⁴ Renato Cruz de Castro, “The Philippines Discovers its Maritime Domain: The Aquino Administration’s Shift in Strategic Focus from Internal to Maritime Security,” *Asian Security* 12, no. 2 (2016): 122.

both countries such as interoperability, AFP modernization, and maritime awareness.⁵ Besides security, the US provided humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic support for the Philippines. EDCA was necessary because of the Philippines' maritime troubles and America's "pivot" to the Pacific. According to Armando Heredia, "Little by little, parts of the Philippines' maritime Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ) were occupied or otherwise harassed by a resurgent People's Republic of China (PRC) Coast Guard and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)."⁶ The US utilized EDCA in attempt to control PRC's hegemony in the region. The US military "build-up in the Asia Pacific region" is a containment strategy "against China's growing military power."⁷ However, with the termination of the VFA, EDCA is useless. The VFA includes the "terms and conditions on the entry and visit of US military personnel for military exercises."⁸ Undeniably, the Philippines and the US have strong ties; however, President Rodrigo Duterte seems to be against this alliance and supports a Philippines-PRC relations. The destabilization of the US-Philippine relations resulting from Duterte's economic negotiations and diplomatic actions in favor of China poses major implications for the US as it seems to be losing its ally and presence in East Asia. Given these possible outcomes, the US-Philippine security alliance may require US to use all instruments of power in convincing Duterte to realign with the US.

The organization of this study starts with the US-Philippines history and relations. This portion sets the context of the alliance and connection between the two countries. Next is the examination of the Philippines' foreign policy. This section examines the shift from the previous Filipino president's balancing strategy with the US to the current president's bandwagoning with China. Duterte's background follows. This section shows Duterte's lack of respect for the rule

⁵ Heredia, "New Defense Agreement Between the Philippines and the U.S.: The Basics."

⁶ Heredia, "New Defense Agreement Between the Philippines and the U.S.: The Basics."

⁷ Robert Sutter et al., *Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Stability* (Washington, DC: Elliot School, 2013), 7.

⁸ DFA.gov.ph

of law and personal animosity towards the US that lead him closer to the PRC. Then, the study describes the impacts of the Philippine's foreign policy on the US. This portion expounds on the US security capabilities, credibility, and future operations in the region. Lastly, the study presents recommendations for the US in maintaining its security alliance with the Philippines and another consideration to preserve its interest in Southeast Asia.

The US-Philippine History and Relations

Throughout the Philippines' modern history, the US involvement dominates any other nations' connection. The US-Philippine relations have existed since the Spanish-American War and remains with the fight against terrorism. For centuries, the US invested troops, resources, and time in aiding the Philippines through natural disasters as well as internal and external conflicts.

The Philippines' Nation State Identity

Historically, the Philippines struggles with its identity as a nation state. For centuries, the islands were under colonial domination and never-ending internal conflicts over regime legitimacy and socioeconomic inequality.⁹ Prior to the colonial era, many foreign powers traded and visited the islands which influenced many of their customs and traditions. From the 16th Century to WWII, the Philippines fell under Spanish, American, and Japanese rule, in that order. As a smaller and weaker state, the Philippines was, and still is, unable to defend its sovereignty on its own. Consequently, internal conflicts "continue to create tension between the state and society."¹⁰ Due to its numerous invasions and occupations, the Philippines was not afforded the time or resources to solve its plethora of internal issues affecting its strength as a nation state.

⁹ de Castro, "The Philippines Discovers," 114.

¹⁰ de Castro, "The Philippines Discovers," 114.

To complicate the Philippines' nation state identity, there are eight major regional groupings in the country: Ilocanos, Igorots, Tagalogs, Bicol, Visayas, Mindanao Christians, Muslims, and indigenous peoples.¹¹ Ilocanos, Igorots, Tagalogs, and Bicol are in the Luzon island group in the North. Ilocanos live in the northeast coast, and "they have a reputation for being hard-working, feisty, clannish and thrifty."¹² Because Ilocanos in the early 20th Century worked on the farms and plantations in Hawaii and the West Coast, they "formed the backbone of migration to the U.S."¹³ Igorots are to the east of the Ilocanos. They are of different tribes with numerous dialects, and perceived as "taciturn, stoic, hardy and sensitive to lowlander criticism."¹⁴ Tagalogs are from the Metro Manila region. They are considered the "aristocrats of the country."¹⁵ Bicol is located in southeast Luzon. Bicolanos have the reputation for being astute politicians and art enthusiasts.¹⁶ These four regional groupings in Luzon are Christians, either Protestant or Catholic. Moreover, a significant number of Filipinos in Luzon support the US-Philippine alliance.

Visayas are from the middle region of the country. Surrounded by water, Visayas have fertile land and an abundance of fish with inhabitants that are "considered musical, fun-loving, gregarious, and profligate."¹⁷ Most Visayans are also Christians. On the other hand, the southern region of the Philippines are predominantly Christians and Muslims. Islam was introduced in Mindanao in the late 14th Century; Muslims in Mindanao are "culturally closer to Indonesia, Malaysia and the Middle East than to the West."¹⁸ On the other hand, the

¹¹ Luis Francia, *Passport Philippines: Your Pocket Guide to Philippine Business, Customs and Etiquette* (1997), 23

¹² Francia, 23

¹³ Francia 23

¹⁴ Francia 23

¹⁵ Francia 24

¹⁶ Francia 24

¹⁷ Francia 24

¹⁸ Francia 25

Mindanao Christians are “self-reliant, pioneering, and practical” with distrust of Manila due to their belief of “discrimination against their island in terms of economic development and aid.”¹⁹ Lastly, there are indigenous peoples all throughout the Philippines. They are “resistant to both Christianity and Islam.”²⁰ The Philippines’ diversity also contributes to its nation-state identity.

The US-Philippine Alliance

The Philippines’ weak nation state identity accounts for its strategic culture that is heavily dependent on alliances to deter external threats. According to Renato Cruz de Castro, “The underdeveloped economy, the colonial origins of the Philippine state, and military needs have fostered dependence on alliances to fill the gaps in the country’s strategic requirements.”²¹ Since the Spanish-American War, the US has been the Philippines’ main strategic partner. Indeed, the US also colonized the Philippines after the war. However, Japan invaded and occupied the Philippines during WWII removing the US control over the country.²² After WWII, the Philippines gained its independence from Japan but also forged a security alliance with the US.

Security Partners: Past to Present

The US-Philippine alliance is tied to both countries’ shared history and security partnership. According to Julian Advincula, “Consistent with Walt’s balance of threat theory, wherein states bind together to deal with common threats, the Philippines chose to stand firmly with its former colonizer against the perceived threat of Soviet community hegemony.”²³ The Philippines’ foreign policy during the Cold War benefited both countries in which the Philippines received protection by the US military and the US established a strong foothold in

¹⁹ Francia, 25

²⁰ Francia, 25

²¹ de Castro, “Philippine Strategic Culture,” 87.

²² de Castro, “Philippine Strategic Culture,” 87.

²³ Julian Advincula, “China’s Leadership Transition and the Future of US-China Relations: Insights from the Spratly Islands Case,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20.1 (2015), 55.

the Pacific. These benefits came at a price: a negative US image. The US supported the authoritarian leader President Ferdinand Marcos, a “guarantor of the American bases”, who eroded the Philippine economy and allowed the “spreading Communist insurgency.”²⁴ Cognizant of the Filipino population’s detestation of Marcos’s failing dictatorship regime, the US helped in ousting him from power. With its initial support and later abandonment of the Filipino dictator, the US image tarnished but its alliance with the Philippines remained. In the end, as the islands sit astride the South China Sea (SCS), the Philippines provided the US the ideal strategic position to contain communism.

Besides the two American bases in Japan, the US also had its military in Subic Bay and Clark Air Base; the US utilized these outposts during the Vietnam War and “kept tabs on Soviet forces, enabling the United States to project its power during the Cold War.”²⁵ These bases facilitated the containment policy on the Soviet Union by serving as staging areas for American military equipment and personnel. Coupled with minimal economic and political gains, the use for these bases came to a halt after the Mount Pinatubo’s eruption and the new Filipino Constitution no longer allowed foreign troops to be stationed in the Philippines. As Haddick states, “In 1992 the Philippines government ordered the US to vacate the large air and naval bases it used on the western side of Luzon Island.”²⁶ For the Philippines, Subic Bay and Clark Air Base were reminders of the past: America’s colonialization. For the US, the bases provided capability, and the withdrawal of US forces reduced its presence in the SCS. To contain China, the US and the Philippines signed the EDCA in 2014, the MDT’s update, to not only authorized

²⁴ Stanley Karnow, “Reagan and the Philippines: Setting Marcos Adrift,” *New York Times* (1989), <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/19/magazine/reagan-and-the-philippines-setting-marcos-adrift.html>.

²⁵ Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal, *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 74-75.

²⁶ Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 57.

US rotational deployments to AFP military facilities but also to allow US rotational naval presence in Subic Bay (see Figure 1).²⁷

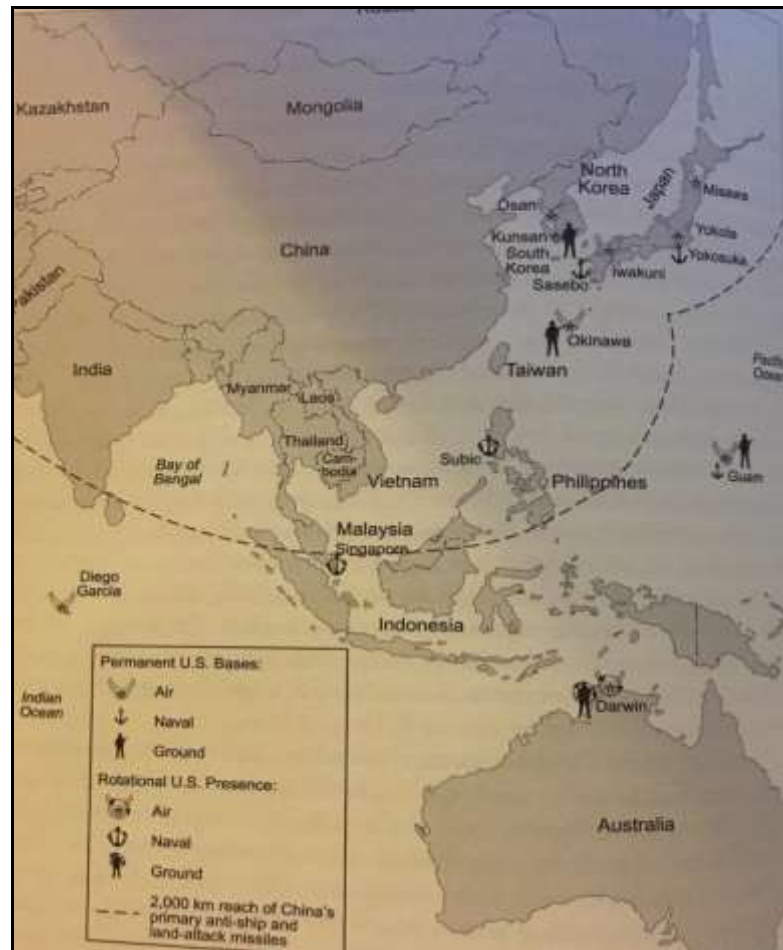


Figure 1: US Military Bases in the Asia-Pacific Region

Source: Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 58.

Duterte's termination of the VFA invalidates EDCA significantly reducing the US presence in the region.

Even before February, Duterte questioned the US military presence. On September 2016, Duterte requested the withdrawal of US Special Operations Forces that were fighting terrorism alongside the AFP in southern Philippines and ordered the Philippine Navy (PN) to stop

²⁷ Haddick, 58.

conducting “joint patrols with the US Navy (which began in March 2016) in the Philippines’ EEZ to avoid upsetting China”.²⁸ The latter certainly reduces the US ability to deter the PRC’s expansionism in the SCS. Similarly, Duterte replaced CARAT Philippines with Sama-Sama (Joint Together) in which the former’s objective was to improve the Philippines and the US territorial defense in the SCS, while the latter’s objectives are “peacetime security concerns such as piracy, smuggling, counter-terrorism, maritime domain awareness, and HADR operations.”²⁹ Conducted in the SCS, CARAT Philippines entailed both the US Navy and PN to exercise amphibious landings, and diving and salvage. This exercise focused on China and Aquino’s maritime security. With Sama-Sama, Duterte shifted to other priorities while showing that he was willing to conduct an exercise with the US. Duterte’s modifications and termination of the VFA are weakening the US-Philippine alliance but strengthening the Philippines’ relations with arguably the next major power.

Balancing versus Bandwagoning

Duterte’s predecessor, President Benigno Aquino III, relied on the Philippines-US alliance. The Philippines noticed China’s maritime expansion in 2009 and when Aquino took office in 2010, he pledged to shift his focus from internal affairs to maritime security.³⁰ Instead of fighting insurgency, the AFP were to secure their waters. This required Aquino to modernize the AFP and he needed the help from the Philippines’ key strategic partners, the US and Japan. Under Aquino, the US steadily assisted the Philippines with equipment, training, and security guarantees, while Japan formed a strategic partnership with the Philippines.³¹ Furthermore,

²⁸ de Castro, Renato Cruz, “Explaining the Duterte Administration’s Appeasement Policy on China: The Power of Fear,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 45.3-4 (2018): 172

²⁹ de Castro, “Explaining the Duterte’s Administration,” 175.

³⁰ de Castro, “The Philippines Discovers,” 111.

³¹ de Castro, “Explaining the Duterte’s Administration,” 174.

President Aquino requested military equipment from the US to help create the “Philippines’ Fleet Desired Force Mix.”³² With the Philippines’ limited defense budget, coupled with complex procurement process, Aquino was not able to complete his planned maritime defense posture.

Aquino and the South China Sea

For the Philippines, the Pacific island chains provide strategic advantage and a way of life. Disputes between the PRC and Philippines escalated in April of 2012 when Filipino fishermen spotted Chinese coast guard vessels in Scarborough Shoal and President Aquino responded by sending a Philippine warship.³³ This encounter “resulted in China’s seizure of the shoal and the Filipino fishermen were subsequently denied access to the valuable fishing grounds around the Scarborough Shoal.”³⁴ Consequently, Aquino shifted the Philippines’ foreign policy towards maritime security and sovereign rights in the SCS. Interestingly, on September 5, 2012, Aquino, through an administrative order, named South China Sea as West Philippine Sea.³⁵ Aquino renamed SCS to proclaim the Philippines’ jurisdiction in its EEZ. Likewise, the renaming was intended to challenge the China’s territorial claims of the entirety of SCS, and Aquino wanted this to be known regionally and internationally, an information operations campaign.

China has also been building artificial islands in SCS. According to Hicks (etc.), the PRC’s “clearest effort to undermine international law has been its artificial construction and militarization of islands in the South China Sea, which has helped shift the balance of power in the region.”³⁶ By obtaining more land, China threatened the Philippines’ strategic advantage and

³² de Castro, “The Philippines Discovers”, 124.

³³ Advincula, 57.

³⁴ Aileen Baviera, “President Duterte’s Foreign Policy Challenges,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2015): 202.

³⁵ Advincula, 57.

³⁶ Kathleen Hicks, Joseph Federici, and Connor Akiyama, *China in the Gray Zone*, European Center of Excellence for Countering the Hybrid Threat (Hybrid COE), April 2019: 3.

way of life as a maritime nation. According to Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, “An estimated 25 percent of the protein needs of the 500 million persons of East Asia are served by SCS fishing, including 80 percent of Philippine diet alone.”³⁷ President Aquino filed the claim in January 23, 2013 to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), a subcomponent of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) responsible for settling maritime disputes, gain clarification of the PRC’s “9 dotted line/dash map.”³⁸ With China’s presence in the SCS, Aquino recognized the negative impact not only on the Philippines’ security but also its economy.

Aquino was a proponent of the rule of law in determining freedom of navigation and freedom of overflight. On January 5, 2014, Aquino deployed “naval and air force contingents on a rotational basis on Thitu/Pag-asa Island in the Spratlys.”³⁹ This deployment was for defense posture and not for power projection or war-fighting objectives. On May 29, 2016, Aquino’s Communication Secretary Herminio Coloma Jr. confirmed that, “President Aquino has been determined in pursuing an advocacy for a rules-based, peaceful and diplomatic resolution of disputes on maritime entitlements in the South China Sea or West Philippine Sea and has gained broad-based support in the international community such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), the G7, and in the European Union.”⁴⁰ By challenging China’s claim in the SCS, Aquino made it clear that he was engaged in balancing strategy against its neighbor.

Aquino: Balancing with the US

³⁷ Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 122.

³⁸ Advincula, 57.

³⁹ Advincula, 57.

⁴⁰ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office. “Malacanang Reacts to China’s Comment on South China Issue.” May 29, 2016, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/malacanang-reacts-to-chinas-comment-on-south-china-issue/>.

On July 12, 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines.⁴¹ The decision resolved that the nine-dash line was invalid and contradicted the international law. The PCA also “found China guilty of damaging the marine environment by building artificial islands, and of illegally preventing Filipinos from fishing and conducting oil explorations in the Philippines’ EEZ.”⁴² The PRC refused to accept the findings and Aquino’s naming of West Philippine Sea. Additionally, China accused the US in interfering in the arbitration process. However, Aquino’s Communication Secretary Coloma dismissed this allegation since “there is no basis.”⁴³ President Aquino was not able to further enforce the Philippines’ foreign policy and implement additional changes to the Philippines’ maritime security, because the decision came a couple weeks after Duterte was sworn into office. Since he relied on the US during his presidency, it is safe to assume that Aquino would have continued to ask for the US to support Philippines’ maritime security as a result of the PCA’s decision.

Under Aquino, the Philippines’ foreign policy was that of a balancing strategy with the US against the PRC. As de Castro explained, minor powers have “small foreign-policy bureaucracies, inadequate military capabilities, few diplomatic posts abroad, and insignificant intelligence agencies that hamper the scope and vitality in conducting their foreign policy.”⁴⁴ Lacking in all of its instruments of power, the Philippines must avoid any conflict with any great power to maintain order and stability

Duterte: Bandwagoning with China

With Duterte as its president and China’s growth, the Philippines foreign policy is now bandwagoning with its neighbor. According to Evelyn Goh, Southeast Asian states “aim to

⁴¹ de Castro, “Explaining the Duterte’s Administration,” 166.

⁴² de Castro, “Explaining the Duterte’s Administration,” 178.

⁴³ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office. “Malacanang Reacts to China’s Comment on South China Issue.”

⁴⁴ de Castro, 167.

assimilate China as a new great power into the regional hierarchy, at a tier below the United States but one above the other regional powers.”⁴⁵ While the rest of Southeast Asia engages in a hedging strategy to attempt to gain benefits of China, Duterte bandwagons with China since expects China to be the top power in the region over time. This strategy may lead him to fully commit its alliance to the PRC resulting in the US loss of a strategic partner and diminished presence in Southeast Asia. Although Duterte’s bandwagoning with China destabilizes the US-Philippine relations, the Philippines’ seeming current foreign policy aligns with the country’s weak nation state identity and strategic culture highly dependent on alliances.

The prevalence of US involvement in the Philippines started to diminish once Duterte took office. During a Philippine-Chinese trade forum in China on October 20, 2016, President Duterte publicly claimed the Philippines’ disengagement from the United States while realigning closer to the PRC.⁴⁶ More recently was his announcement of terminating the VFA; this announcement will surely destabilize the US-Philippine alliance.

President Duterte: the “Mayor of the Philippines”

Duterte’s political experience started as a mayor for Davao City, one of the most populous cities in the Philippines. After two decades of being a mayor, he served as an assistant city prosecutor for several years, and a congressman for three years.⁴⁷ Since he spent most of his political time in Davao, Duterte relies heavily on his experience as a mayor. In the 1980s, Davao was the “petri dish for a Communist-led insurgency” in which Filipino Communist guerrillas

⁴⁵ Goh, Evelyn, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security* 32:3 (2007/2008): 155.

⁴⁶ Alfred McCoy, “A Rupture in Philippine-U.S. Relations: Geopolitical Implications,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (2016): 1049.

⁴⁷ Baviera, 203.

threatened the city.⁴⁸ Violence escalated, and the US provided military assistance. This anti-communist movement timeframe was when Duterte was elected. However, Duterte “co-opted partisans on all sides, bringing in ex-Communists to work for him in the city government and warning both criminal gangs and recalcitrant Reds to move elsewhere-or else.”⁴⁹ His support for all sides is a similar hedging strategy that Duterte is doing between the US and China in that he seems to be acquiring support from both countries.

Duterte: Rule of Law and the US

Davao remains as Duterte’s sanctuary. Instead of being called “president”, he favors to be called “Mayor of the Philippines.”⁵⁰ This preference reflects his populist leadership in that he appeals to the masses. As it was when he was the mayor of Davao, anti-drug campaign is one of his main priorities. In the Philippines’ National Security Policy for 2017 to 2022, Duterte stressed that “the Philippines’ growing illegal drugs problem in particular needs a determined proactive solution.”⁵¹ Duterte even “encourages violence against drug users and criminals.”⁵² Drugs in the Philippines is national problem; however, his advocacy of nonjudicial violence or vigilante justice relating to drugs is the bigger issue. The use of violence shows a lack of respect for rule of law. Additionally, corruption within his administration is prevalent. According to Sheila Coronel, “Duterte’s trusted circle is made up for people he knew and worked with in Davao” who have acquired corruption charges.⁵³ In addition to the human rights violations, Duterte’s corruption charges distances the US from the Philippines. Simultaneously, the PRC entices the Duterte as he requested China to provide loans supporting his “Build, Build, Build”

⁴⁸ Sheila S. Coronel, “The Vigilante President: How Duterte’s Brutal Populism Conquered the Philippines,” *Foreign Affairs* (2019): 2.

⁴⁹ Coronel, 3.

⁵⁰ Coronel, 4.

⁵¹ Rodrigo Duterte, *National Security Polity for the Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People* (Manila, Philippines, April 2017), 10.

⁵² Coronel, 4.

⁵³ Coronel, 4.

program.⁵⁴ This effort is one of many projects involving the PRC indicating the shift of the Philippines' foreign policy away from the US.

Duterte seems to mistrust and dislike the US. His doubt of the US started when he was Davao's mayor back in 2002 and "the US authorities spirited away an American undercover agent when local police tried to investigate a suspicious explosion at the man's hotel room."⁵⁵ Understandably, any statesman would cast doubts on a foreign entity that meddles with his or her governance justifying for his dislike and behavior towards the US. Duterte's dislike for the US became apparent when he mocked Americans' voice and called President Barack Obama a derogatory name during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference in September 2016.⁵⁶ Obama criticized Duterte's extrajudicial killings resulting from his anti-drug campaign. Duterte's hedging strategy, advocacy for nonjudicial violence, and mistrust and dislike for the US seem to espouse for his shift of the Philippines' foreign policy towards the PRC.

Duterte: Enticed by China

China's growth in its economy, military, and influence on other countries is appealing to the Philippines. With the second largest economy in the world, the PRC continues to expand its economic influence around the world with the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI mirrors the ancient Silk Road connecting Asian countries together with Europe "through trade from Xi'an in China, Central Asia, Middle East, Europe and Russia and the maritime Silk Road started from Fujian through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, stopping in

⁵⁴ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office. "Presidential News Desk Speech of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte During the Philippines China Business Forum", August 30, 2019, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/presidential-speech/speech-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-during-the-philippines-china-business-forum/>.

⁵⁵ Baviera, 203.

⁵⁶ McCoy, 1050.

Africa along the way.”⁵⁷ This expansive connectivity entices the Philippines considering its largest trading partner is China. Not to be left out from the BRI’s benefits, in late 2018, Duterte’s government signed a memorandum of understanding with the PRC on BRI cooperation.⁵⁸ By doing so, Duterte recognized that China’s economic contribution to the Philippines might have surpassed that of the security support from the US. Additionally, Duterte might presume that the Chinese military power is comparable to that of the US.

With its emerging economy, the PRC’s military continues to expand, which poses a greater threat to the region. People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) military capacity overpowers that of the AFP which is “beginning its military reforms from a very low base”.⁵⁹ Although the US leads in military power, China continues to improve its military systems and processes to be able to deter American’s military strength. De Castro stated that, “Since the late 1990s, the PLA has been developing tactics and acquiring weapon systems that could disrupt American US naval/air operations, or slow down the deployment of American air and naval forces to the theater of operations.”⁶⁰ Figure 2 shows the PRC’s anti-access capabilities, a concern for the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).

⁵⁷ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, “China’s Belt & Road Initiative Complements Build-Build-Build”, November 20, 2018, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/chinas-belt-road-initiative-complements-build-build-build/>.

⁵⁸ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office. “Exchange Ceremony of Signed Bilateral Documents Witnessed by Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte and People’s Republic of China President Xi Jinping.” November 20, 2018, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/presidential-speech/exchange-ceremony-of-signed-bilateral-documents-witnessed-by-philippine-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-and-peoples-republic-of-china-president-xi-jinping/>.

⁵⁹ Haddick, 147.

⁶⁰ de Castro, “The Philippines Discovers”, 122.

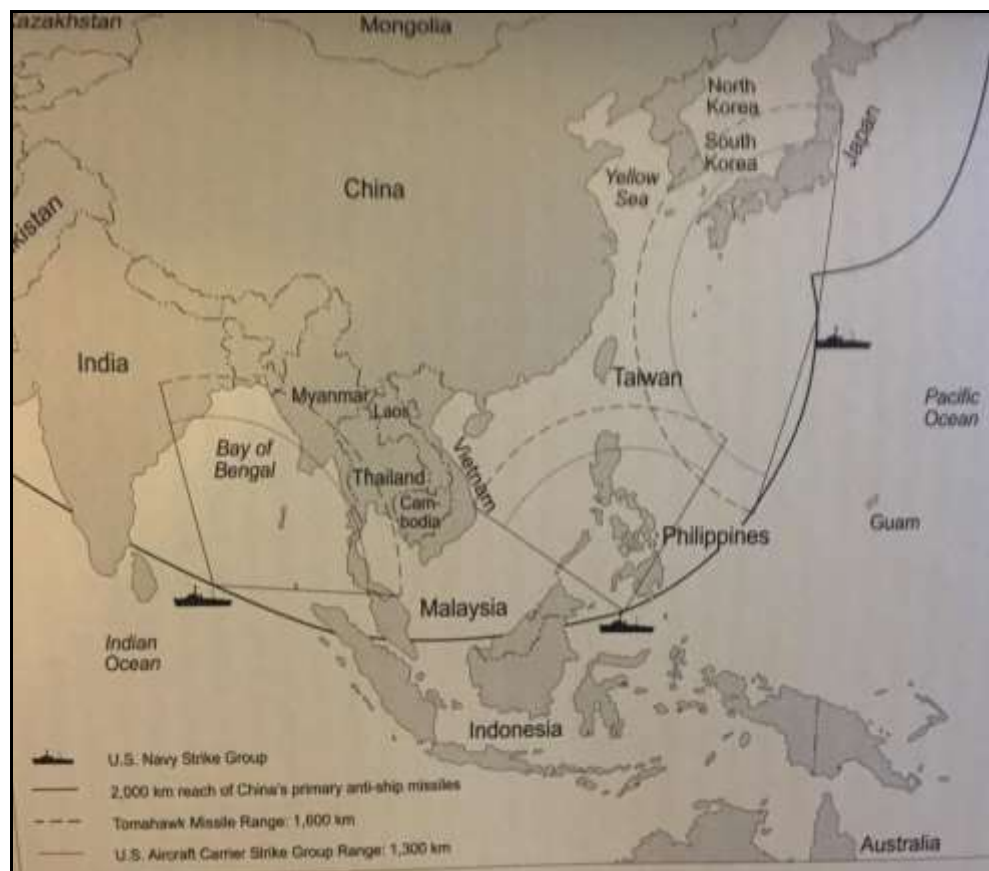


Figure 2: The PRC's Anti-Access Capability

Source: Robert Haddick, Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 89.

Moreover, China's salami slicing and island building in the South China Sea extends the PLA's capability. These advancements could prevent the US in policing the waters in Asia and intervening in any conflict in the area. This predicament places the Philippines in the middle of its old and potentially new ally. With its proximity to the PRC, it is not startling that President Duterte is aligning closer to its neighbor. Another area that the US needs to consider is that the disputed SCS islands unequivocally bind the Philippines and China. The PCA's ruling in favor of the Philippines is meaningless when the PRC has constructed and militarized artificial islands in the SCS. Moreover, Duterte is unwilling to compel China to abide by the PCA's decision.

There are approximately 100-230 islands in the SCS with “six claimants: China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.”⁶¹ Figure 3 shows the 9 dotted line/dash map which encompasses the entire SCS.

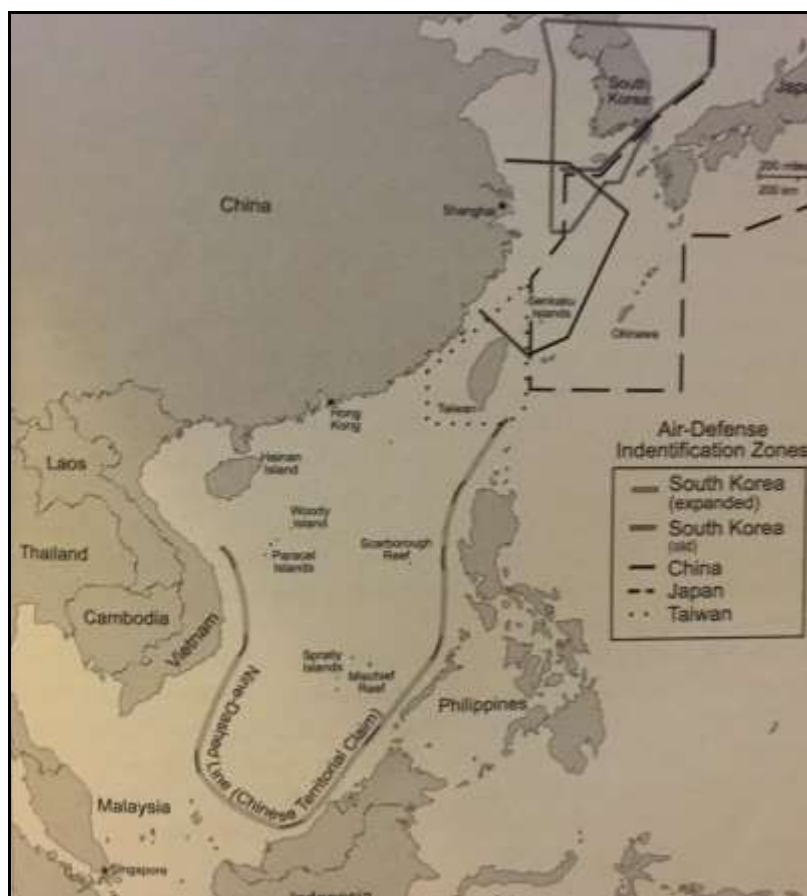


Figure 3: Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia

Source: Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 17.

Oil, natural gas, fishing, land, and maritime access are the reasons these countries claim either all or some of the islands. As for China, the Han Dynasty from 2 B.C. discovered the islands which the “9 dotted line/dash map” reflects while the Philippines claim the islands “by reason of geography (proximity to its homeland) and the principle of *terra nullius* (no country had effective sovereignty over the Islands until the 1930’s when France and then Japan acquired the

⁶¹ Advincula, 57.

islands).”⁶² The 9 dotted line/dash map’s historical importance reinforces the PRC’s territorial claim of over the SCS as depicted in Figure 3. China is claiming territory which challenges freedom of navigation. On the other hand, proximity and the international law serve as the basis for the Philippines’ EEZ claims only for economic resources. These EEZ claims do not include the right to restrict access to the SCS waters. Figure 4 shows China’s nine-dash line that encompasses the entirety of SCS and the Philippines’ (and other claimants’) UNCLOS 200 nautical mile economic claim.



Figure 4: The PRC’s “9 dotted line/dash map”

Source: Christopher Mirasola, “A Shifting Tide in the South China Sea: The Permanent Court of Arbitration Declares Jurisdiction, *Harvard International Law Journal*, Accessed on January 17, 2020, <https://harvardilj.org/2015/11/a-shifting-tide-in-the-south-PRC-sea-the-permanent-court-of-arbitration-declares-jurisdiction/>.

China’s 9 dotted line/dash map contradicts international law and raises international transit and access issues. As Chau and Kane states, “Both Vietnam and the Philippines have asserted that China’s map has no basis in international law and that it cannot form the basis of a joint development agreement because it covers more than 80 percent of the SCS—including areas that overlap with their EEZs.”⁶³ To make matters worse, the PRC did not clarify its claims through

⁶² Advincula, 57.

⁶³ Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 131.

ITLOS making it difficult to determine which territories were disputed or not. Out of the six claimants, the Philippines was the only one that pursued clarification on its ownership of the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal.

The SCS is China's main corridor of maritime trade into most of Asia. The PRC's territorial claims through the 9 dash line/dotted map "reflected China's intention to consolidate its jurisdictional claims, expand its naval reach, and undermine the positions of other claimant states through coercive diplomacy."⁶⁴ In other words, the nine-dash line was China's attempt to reclaim its power by securing vital strategic areas and resources. In 2013, China became the largest importer of crude oil, surpassing the United States.⁶⁵ Figure 5 shows the PRC's crude oil import routes through the SCS with most of the country's oil transit through the Strait of Malacca.

⁶⁴ de Castro, "The Philippines Discovers", 111.

⁶⁵ Haddick, 10.

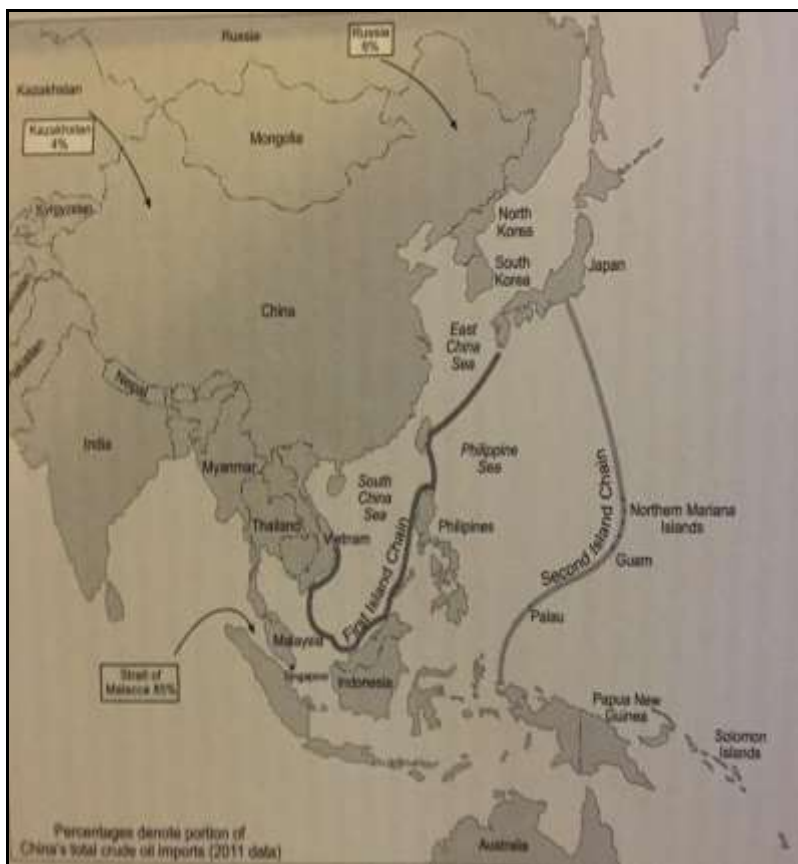


Figure 5: Pacific Island Chains and the PRC's Crude Oil Import Routes

Source: Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: PRC, America, and the Future of the Pacific*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 11.

According to Robert Haddick, “85 percent of China’s oil imports must transit the Strait of Malacca.”⁶⁶ Like most of the great and regional powers, the PRC acquires its oil from the Middle East. Besides the economic and political benefits, control of the SCS provides China freedom of maneuver militarily. China has not only constructed islands but also dispatched patrol vessels, blocked portions of the SCS, shot water cannons, collided with vessels, and extracted oil in disputed waters.⁶⁷ The use of these ambiguous forces is one of the ways China gains advantage without engaging in a conflict. Since the Philippines is inferior in all instruments and the US has not responded to these gray zone activities, the PRC is successful in

⁶⁶ Haddick, 10.

⁶⁷ Advincula, 59.

avoiding an open war. As for the artificial islands, they have been militarized with “radar domes, shelters for surface-to-air missiles and a runway long enough for fighter jets.”⁶⁸ This militarization increases China’s projection of power in the region. Consequently, the PRC’s presence in the SCS poses a military problem for the US

Instead of continuing his predecessor’s balancing policy with the US against China, Duterte pursues a bandwagoning policy with China. Duterte’s predecessors depended on the US which limited the Philippines-PRC relations. Aware of China’s emerging power and proximity, Duterte shifts the Philippines’ foreign policy closer to this regional power assuming the PRC can offer more opportunities and benefits for his country. His mistrust of the US also contributes to his alignment with PRC. During his state visits to China and Brunei to enhance trade ties in October 22, 2016, President Duterte stated that he and President Xi “agreed to continue discussions on confidence-building measures, including bilateral consultation mechanism to discuss immediate issues of concern in South China Sea.”⁶⁹ Fearful for further economic losses, especially with the nascent BRI, President Duterte avoided discussing the 2016 PCA decision with the PRC and instead, gravitated toward a bandwagoning policy to have a good standing with China. This shift in the Philippine policy will have an impact on the country’s alliance with the US.

The Impacts of the Philippines’ Foreign Policy on the US

Duterte’s bandwagoning with China affects the US in three areas: security capabilities, credibility, and future conduct in the region. Since the start of the US-Philippine relationship, the Philippine’s strategic location has been a US interest, especially in its ability to project power

⁶⁸ Hicks, 5.

⁶⁹ Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, “President Duterte’s State Visits to China and Brunei Enhance Trade Ties,” October 22, 2016, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/president-dutertes-state-visits-to-china-and-brunei-enhance-trade-ties-22-oct-2016/>.

in Asia. In turn, the US provided security assistance to the Philippines. With the ever-changing geopolitical situation, the US military bases in the Philippines changed to access to AFP facilities. With Duterte's termination of the VFA, access changed to the US will no longer able to conduct training or exercises in the Philippines, unless there is a negotiation between him and President Donald Trump by August. The shift of the Philippines' foreign policy closer to China exacerbates the destabilization of the US-Philippines relations because now, the US cannot uphold its security promises to the Philippines. Indeed, there are US military bases in Korea and Japan providing security guarantees to these countries. Nonetheless, most INDOPACOM plans involve access to the Philippines. These plans will have to be reconsidered.

Coupled with President Xi Jinping's support, Duterte's personal animosity towards Americans also degrades the US credibility as the world power. During the Philippines' struggle against China over the SCS, the US did not intervene. This noninvolvement can be interpreted as the US abandoning its security ally by avoiding conflict with China, a great power competition. Clearly, Duterte deems the PRC as the winner. Countries in the region may be persuaded just the same. With its BRI and belief that it has territorial claims of the SCS, China's influence expands well beyond the region further reducing the US credibility.

The growing Philippines-PRC relations also affects how the US will conduct future operations in Asia. If Duterte allowed the US access to the Philippines, the US would still have a hard time in fighting China in an open war. With its sheer size of its population, economy, and comparable military, China can engage a prolonged war with the US involving conventional and unconventional methods such as cyber and information warfare. Currently, neither country seem to be pursuing conflict with each other. If the Philippines-PRC relations develop even more, the Philippines may allow the Chinese military access into the country. This possibility would greatly change the INDOPACOM's capacity and capability. If the US and China become

involved in a direct or indirect conflict, the US might have to conduct joint forcible entry operations (JFEO) into the Philippines. This JFEO is reminiscent of the US island hopping during WWII, a significant regression of not only the US-Philippines relations but of US power. If the US intends for the Philippines to remain as its strategic partner, then the US needs to consider a better strategy to entice the Philippines to overcome the PRC's growing support.

Recommendations for the US

To convince the Philippines to realign with the US all instruments of power must be considered. China's operations in the SCS "skirt the distinction between conflict and peace."⁷⁰ Regardless, these grey zone actions have given the PRC control of the SCS. Perhaps in the early stages of the PRC's island building, the US could have intervened but today, military actions would lend itself to an open war. With the ongoing war in the Middle East, Russia's persistent threat, other missions around the world, and the current political situation, the US is not ready to combat China over the artificial and militarized islands in the SCS. In addition to its military ability, the US needs to use its diplomatic, informational, and economic power to entice the Philippines while avoiding war with China.

Since Duterte leads the shift in the Philippines' foreign policy, the US needs to diplomatically focus on him. Duterte is a populist leader who thrives on his campaigns, especially that of anti-drug, and his administration that is composed of his Davao cronies. According to Jim Gomez, "Duterte threatened to terminate the security agreement after Washington reportedly canceled the U.S. visa of a loyal ally, Sen. Ronald dela Rosa, who was linked to human rights violations when he first enforced the president's deadly anti-drug

⁷⁰ Hicks, 3

crackdown as the national police chief in 2016.”⁷¹ His demand from the US on behalf of Sen dela Rosa does not equate to terminating a longstanding agreement. With Xi Jinping at his side, Duterte’s power and influence will continue to grow making any internal opposition impossible. The only diplomatic recommendation for the US is to wait for his term to finish. The 1987 Philippine Constitution limits the presidency term to six years.⁷² However, the Philippine Constitution does not preclude Duterte from running for vice president. After pre-election survey in December 2019, Duterte’s daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, was the top candidate for the presidency and that he would serve as her vice president.⁷³ At this time, there are numerous presidential candidates and too early to determine the top contenders. If Sara Duterte runs for President, the US should support her popular opposition for the Philippines’ presidential election in 2022 for she will follow her father’s footsteps. Then, the US can convince the next president to realign with US. Before this realignment occurs, the VFA would have been in effect for almost two years. The risk of waiting for the next president is allowing China to increase its influence in the Philippines and in the region.

The US can use informational operations to influence the Filipino society. Although Filipinos know of the extreme circumstances of any drug violation in their country, the US must communicate to them that Duterte’s anti-drug campaign violates international laws. While he remains as the president, Duterte will continue to inflict fear to his citizens but information operations can affect the next election. Other informational operations that include cyber and media actions to delegitimize Duterte’s government or downplay China’s influence can be used

⁷¹ Gomez, “Philippines notifies US of intent to end major security pact.”

⁷² Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Operations Office, “The Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines,” *Official Gazette*, 1987, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/constitutions/1987-constitution/>.

⁷³ Azer Paroccha, “Duterte-Duterte in 2022? Possibilities are Limitless: Palace.” *Philippine News Agency*, December 19, 20219, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1089159>.

as well. These operations must abide by the US moral values and international laws, otherwise, these informational operations will undermine the “greatest sources of strength” for the US.⁷⁴

Economically, the US must continue to trade and provide financial assistance to the Philippines. The US cannot compete with PRC’s enticement with its economic growth and BRI. However, the debt trap resulting in unsustainable loans can be better communicated to the Filipino society, another information campaign strategy. With Duterte’s loan requests for infrastructure projects, like his “Build, Build, Build” program, the Philippines will more than likely fall in a debt trap. In the US Southern Command 2019 Posture Statement, “Many countries are beginning to recognize the long-term consequences of mortgaging their future to China, as seen in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, Djibouti, and the Maldives.”⁷⁵ These countries were unable to pay back the PRC government and as a result, China gains access to these countries’ ports and other infrastructures. In the meantime, the US must sustain its economic ties with the Philippines to avoid further anti-US sentiments. The US should also maintain its naval powers in the region to facilitate freedom of navigation, especially concerning commerce and trade.

The recommendations above only pertain to the US realigning with the Philippines. If the US deems the cost of realignment is not worth the value that would be gained, the US will need to consider building a formal security alliance with another country in the region. If Duterte runs for president again, he will mostly likely win, further improving the prospects for closer Philippines-PRC relations. If he does not run again, there is still the likelihood that the next president will continue Duterte’s legacy. Additionally, the abrogation of the VFA will

⁷⁴ Hicks, 5.

⁷⁵ Craig Faller, US Department of Defense, *SOUTHCOM 2019 Posture Statement* (Doral, FL: United States Southern Command, 2019), 7.

continue to decrease the US presence in Southeast Asia. Instead of waiting for the Philippines' next election and risking its interests and security while doing so, the US must revamp its INDOPACOM plans that involve basing out of another country besides the Philippines.

Conclusion

From the Age of Exploration to WWII to today's great power competition, the Philippines is no stranger to the intricacy of world affairs. With over 7,000 islands located in Southeast Asia, this archipelagic state's geography isolates the Philippines, but makes the islands vulnerable to large powers. Most recently, the emerging power China influences the Philippines' foreign policy. Couple this with his animosity towards the US, Duterte terminated the VFA between the US and the Philippines significantly impacting the US security capabilities, credibility, and future conduct in the region. If the US decides to realign with the Philippines while avoiding open war with China, all instruments of power must be used, and this strategy requires time. The risk of realigning with the Philippines is the PRC's ability to increase its influence in the country and the region so in the meantime, the US should consider another option: establish a formal alliance with a different country in Southeast Asia.

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President Xi Jinping”, November 20, 2018, <https://pcoo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/20181120-Toast-remarks-of-President-Rodrigo-Roa-Duterte-during-the-state-banquet-hosted-for-People%E2%80%99s-Republic-of-China-President-Xi-Jinping1.pdf>.

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