



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 168 | June 26, 2012

Future Challenges in the US-Philippines Alliance

BY RENATO CRUZ DE CASTRO

US President Barack Obama and Filipino President Benigno Aquino's meeting at the White House on June 8 attracted a lot of attention on both sides of the Pacific, held at a time when Chinese and Filipino vessels were locked in a stand-off over Scarborough Shoal in the West Philippine/South China Sea. After their meeting, Presidents Obama and Aquino acknowledged the importance of their bilateral economic ties and reiterated their commitment to bolster trade and economic integration within the Asia-Pacific. Regarding the standoff over Scarborough Shoal, the Philippines received vague assurances that the United States would abide by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. President Aquino requested that the United States further assist the Philippines in developing a credible defense capability.

Renato Cruz De Castro, Senior Professor of International Studies at De La Salle University, Manila, explains that “while the Obama administration has somewhat enhanced security ties with the Philippines because of the regional South China Sea dispute, it is still mindful of the need to manage the broader relationship with China in order to limit contentious strategic rivalry.”

In response, President Obama said that the United States would continue to support Filipino efforts to further develop its military capacity. However, the joint statement made no mention of what support Washington would extend to its ally, nor did it spell out what military hardware will be turned over to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Clearly, the meeting revealed an underlying tension in the alliance—while the Obama administration has somewhat enhanced security ties with the Philippines because of the regional South China Sea dispute, it is still mindful of the need to manage the broader relationship with China in order to limit contentious strategic rivalry.

From Internal to Territorial Maritime Defense US-Philippines security relations were revitalized after 9/11 with the formation of the global coalition against the war on terror. However, since 2005, the United States has sought to strengthen and deepen its interactions with the Philippines, not only to neutralize terrorist groups but also to contain Beijing's growing political and economic influence inside the Philippines. Moreover, China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has encouraged the United States to further develop the AFP's military capabilities beyond internal security.

The first US-Philippines bilateral strategic dialogue was held in January 2011, and discussions centered on new areas of cooperation. Kurt Campbell, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, reassured his Filipino counterparts by promising “provision of equipment through excess defense sales, training of elements of their coast guard and navy, and deeper consultations at a strategic, political, and military level.” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton later reiterated US support for Filipino maritime defense development at a signing ceremony commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Philippines-US alliance, where she promised “greater support for external defense, particularly maritime domain awareness.”

Beyond the Summit Meeting No amount of US material and technical assistance will enable the Philippines to confront an assertive China. The development of Filipino defense capabilities for early warning, surveillance, communication, command and control



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are designed for “joint operations capabilities” in maritime defense and interdiction operations in line with US capabilities throughout the region. Thus, Filipino capabilities merely complement the deterrence provided by US forward deployment and its other bilateral alliances in the region. In the final analysis, Filipino territorial defense is predicated on the US assertion as the dominant naval and military power in the Pacific Ocean.

Furthermore, the US-Philippines defense treaty does not provide for an automatic response from either party in the event of an armed attack. It only requires consultations to determine what military action, if any, both would take. More importantly, it has no mention whatsoever of a response in the event of conflict in the South China Sea over disputed islands and territories. Whether the United States will be able to respond to a contingency in the South China Sea depends upon whether US forces are physically prepositioned to provide immediate and timely assistance. The United States can only effectively guarantee Filipino external defense if it has access to facilities near the South China Sea from which it can rapidly deploy in the event of an armed confrontation.

Thus, in August 2011, the United States and the Philippines agreed to focus their efforts on the development of a framework for increased bilateral and multilateral security and maritime domain awareness. Among the measures that were considered are: 1) a US rotational presence in the Philippines to assist the AFP in developing its own capability for territorial defense; 2) to increase bilateral maritime security activities; 3) development of joint-use maritime security support facilities; 4) improved bilateral information sharing; 5) coordinated and integrated maritime security initiatives between US Pacific Command and the AFP.

However, an increased US military presence in the Philippines could trigger a political backlash from Filipino nationalist and left-wing organizations, and also lead to a deterioration in bilateral China-Philippines relations. President Aquino must explain to ordinary Filipinos that his moves to enhance the country’s territorial defense posture in particular and national security in general, are predicated on the United States’ resolve and capability to assert itself as a Pacific nation and to remain the primary Pacific power into the second decade of the 21st century. Thus, the Philippines must play an active role in facilitating US efforts in the midst of the changing regional security environment generated by China’s emergence.

Facing the Challenges US military assistance to the AFP, combined with the need for reforms in the Filipino defense establishment, the clamor for a clarification of Washington’s security commitment to Manila under the 1951 MDT, and the political cost of increased US strategic access to the Philippines requires attention and action from both sides. Unfortunately, these issues were overlooked during the brief meeting between President Obama and President Aquino. These are the variables, however, that will haunt the two allies as they confront the region’s security challenges. Currently, the Philippines simply has no military capacity to confront China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea as the AFP had long been preoccupied with internal security operations.

In summary, the Philippines need US technical, material, and financial assistance to develop the AFP’s capabilities for maritime surveillance and patrols. Such US assistance should be made available upon the understanding that the AFP will rid itself of the bureaucratic inertia that inhibits it from incorporating territorial defense amidst a changing regional security environment. Such assistance correspondingly requires the AFP to proactively tackle the problem of widespread corruption within its ranks. Finally, these requisites should be buttressed by a continuing resolve on the part of the United States to remain the primary Pacific naval and military power well into the second decade of the 21st century.

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