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Reef and Relations: Is the Philippines-US Alliance Finally Maturing?

BY JULIO S. AMADOR III

The grounding last month of the US Navy minesweeper, the *USS Guardian*, in the world-famous UNESCO World Heritage site of Tubbataha Reef off the Philippines' western coast raised questions inside the Philippines regarding how the US alliance affects the country. Tubbataha Reef and its nearby environs are rich fishing grounds and a good source of food and income for many Filipinos. It is also considered one of the top dive sites of the world, teeming with marine life amidst a remarkable underwater terrain. Current estimates indicate that about 4,000 square meters of the reef have been damaged by the *USS Guardian*, a colossal loss in terms of the Philippines' renowned marine biodiversity.

Julio S. Amador III, Foreign Affairs Research Specialist at the Foreign Service Institute of the Philippines, explains that the recent grounding in Filipino waters of the *USS Guardian*, “[s]hows just how delicate managing alliances can be, and the response by the Filipino and US governments also demonstrates a level of maturity in managing the issue.”

The incident also raises questions in some quarters about the capacity of the US Navy, with President Benigno Aquino III himself asking why, with sophisticated navigational equipment, the US vessel ventured into a well-mapped reef. While this one incident is not indicative of the US Navy as an institution, it does give fodder to those individuals who believe that the military decline of the United States is imminent. In the Philippines, militant groups unfriendly towards the United States are now using this incident as another indication of the lopsidedness in bilateral relations between the two countries. Others are aghast at the arrogance of the ship's captain who, when warned about his intrusion into the national park, replied that the complaint should be raised with the US Embassy in Manila. What happened next is now history. The vessel promptly ran aground resulting in the evacuation of all personnel.

This incident shows just how delicate managing alliances can be, and the response by the Filipino and US governments also demonstrates a level of maturity in managing the issue. An investigation is on-going and both sides have agreed to fully cooperate. Already, there are indications from the Filipino side that the government is willing to charge only what existing laws dictate, pending the completion of the investigation and full assessment of total damages. Furthermore, the immediate response by senior officials from both countries is a positive sign of the willingness between the two sides to be both pragmatic and responsive to local sensitivities. Senior officials from the United States, including US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas and Vice Admiral Scott H. Swift, commander of the US 7th Fleet, have expressed their regret over the incident. The US embassy in Manila has promised to give an initial \$100,000 for rehabilitation of the reefs and will soon be conducting discussions with local conservation groups and experts on how to further conserve and restore the area.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

Critics of the two governments should take note that the United States has already

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invested a considerable amount of money into the protection and preservation of coral reefs, and not only in the Philippines, but also in neighboring countries. The Coral Triangle Support Partnership is a \$32 million project supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). That the incident happened is regrettable and further efforts should be made so that it is not repeated, but it does not mean that the cooperative efforts between the two countries should be downgraded, or worse, terminated. Instead, the incident should lead to a greater sensitivity of the other facets of Philippine-US relations.

The two countries have had a long history of working together and the military aspect of the alliance is an important facet of the overall relationship, but further cooperation in other areas should be emphasized and supported. The incident in Tubbataha opens up a new opportunity to cooperate on environmental protection, which is an issue that strikes a chord among citizens of both countries. Already, there are reports that the US government is willing to provide additional assistance including radar and communications equipment to help the Philippines’ reef rangers and coast guard improve their capacity to protect Tubbataha. This would be of great value in ensuring the reef’s survival. Further collaboration should be encouraged such as scientific partnerships between marine science institutions in the United States and the Philippines, environmental tourism, and investment in coral reef conservation.

Protocols that cover US naval movements near protected areas could also be adopted so that future accidents can be avoided. As a result of this incident, such a move could allay any fears that the United States is running roughshod over the Philippines. Acknowledging local expertise and information should also be something that US naval officers take into consideration when navigating through Philippine waters. On the Philippine side, coordination among the various government agencies involved should be emphasized so that there are no conflicting messages. A lead agency should be designated that addresses this issue on behalf of the government. A comprehensive rehabilitation plan for Tubbataha also needs to be developed to showcase how serious both two sides are in managing the aftermath of the incident.

Going forward, managing the alliance should not be too difficult for the Philippines and the United States, as both states have a long history of working and cooperating together. That does not detract from the fact that US officials should be more respectful of Philippine navigational laws and restrictions regarding its sovereign territory. Nor should it make the Philippine side complacent with regard to implementing its environmental laws. However, what this incident illustrates is the capacity of the allies to be more mature in managing a potentially serious diplomatic incident.

That the United States has already acknowledged some responsibility is an indication of its respect towards its ally. The Philippine side, meanwhile, has demonstrated a pragmatic and principled stance to an otherwise incendiary issue; thus, the government’s ability to be firm with regard to the implementation of its environmental laws and its capacity to separate this issue from the military relationship is commendable.

How the two allies will work together after this incident will be a good indication of the maturity and future direction of the alliance. Looking at the current situation, the outlook is positive.

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APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Damien Tomkins

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Julio S. Amador III is on sabbatical leave from the Foreign Service Institute of the Philippines and will be a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington May through November 2013. Currently, he is a graduate student specializing in foreign policy at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which he is affiliated. He can be contacted via email at july32000@gmail.com.