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GI COME BACK: America's (More Often) Return to the Philippines By Felix K. Chang



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“This is not primarily a military relationship” answered the U.S. ambassador in Manila when asked about the relations between the Philippines and the United States. Perhaps not, but its military aspects have certainly gained greater prominence in recent years. Indeed, ahead of President Barack Obama’s originally planned visit to Manila in October 2013, both countries were working on a new security accord, called the Increased Rotational Presence (IRP) Agreement. Once in effect, it would allow American forces to more regularly rotate through the island country for joint U.S.-Philippine military exercises, focusing on maritime security, maritime domain awareness, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The new agreement would also allow the United States to preposition the combat equipment used by its forces at Philippine military bases. That, in turn, would save the time and fuel needed to fly in such equipment and keep it close at hand in case of a crisis. Eventually, the frequency of U.S.-Philippine exercises could increase to the point where there would be a near-continuous American military presence in the Philippines.¹

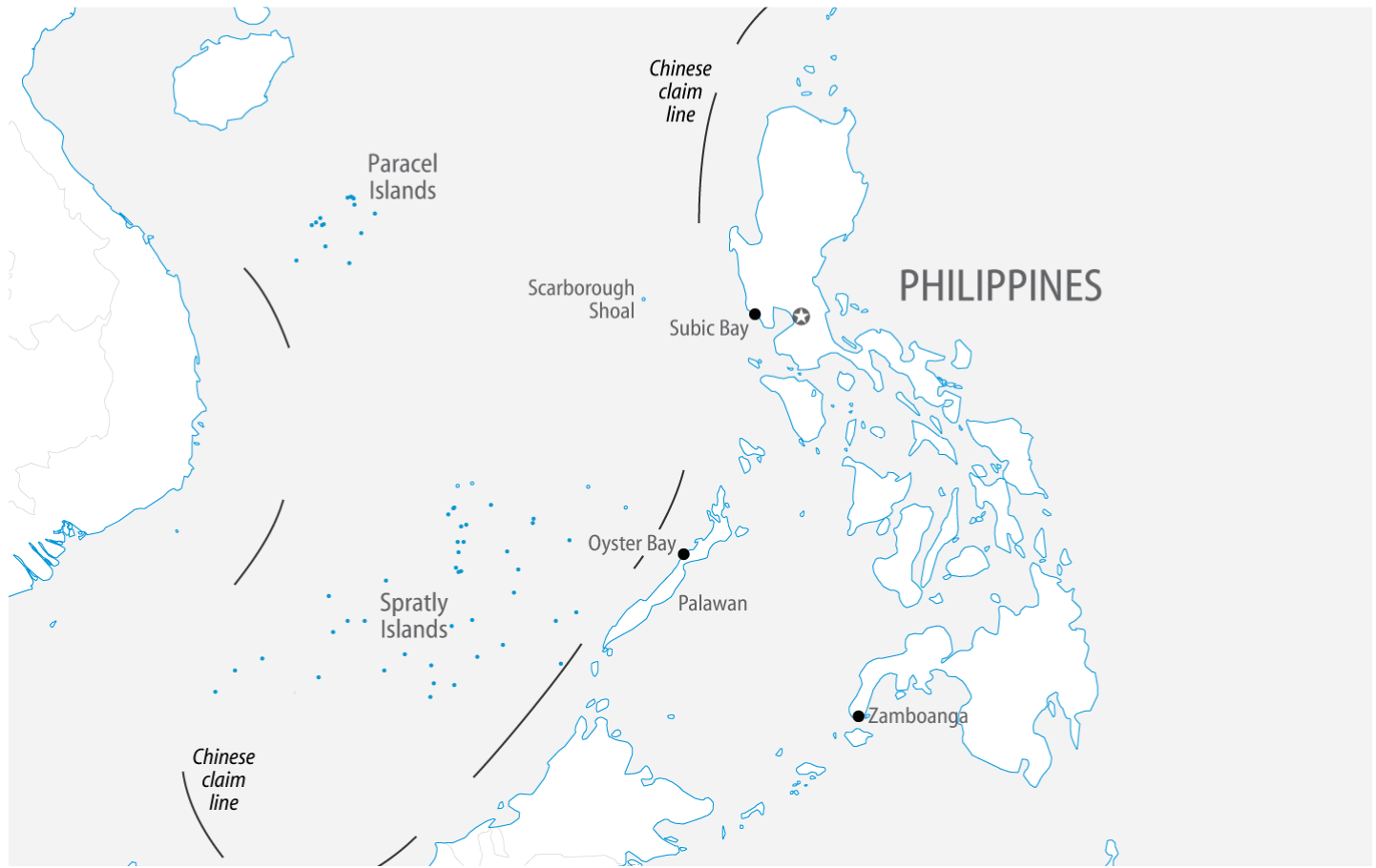
HISTORY OF THE SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

The agreement marks a significant milestone in the long-lived military relationship between the Philippines and the United States. That relationship was forged during World War II, when Filipinos fought alongside Americans against Imperial Japan and during which American General Douglas MacArthur honored his vow to “return” to liberate the Philippines. Soon after the war, the United States granted the Philippines its independence and formalized the military relationship in the form of two early Cold War treaties: the Military Bases Treaty (1947) and the Mutual Defense Treaty (1951)—the latter of which remains in force today. The former treaty would result in the creation of America’s two largest overseas military bases: Clark Air Base and Naval Base Subic Bay. They and their smaller satellite bases across the Philippines represented what the Chief of Naval Operations in 1958 referred to as “an essential part of a worldwide base system designed to deter communism.”² For much of the Cold War and particularly during the Vietnam Conflict, they provided logistics support for the U.S. 7th Fleet in the Western Pacific as well as military operations across Southeast Asia.

¹ Tarra Quismundo, “Obama ‘looking forward’ to trip to PH, says US envoy,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Sep. 24, 2013; “Press Conference on the Framework Agreement on IRP of US Military,” Embassy of the Philippines, Washington, Aug. 31, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhxcMhc7UKU>.

² Chief of Naval Operations, letter to Joint Chiefs of Staff, Nov. 4, 1958, Joint Chiefs of Staff Record Files, 1519/120.

Many Filipinos, however, saw the bases in a different light. Ever since the Philippines was a colony of the United States, the bases were tangible reminders of American influence over the islands. And after the independence of the Philippines, many saw them as an affront to the full sovereignty of the new country. In addition, the presence of the bases naturally led to other practical, but prickly questions: what level of financial compensation should the Philippines receive for the bases; which country should have legal jurisdiction over Americans off-base or Filipinos on-base; and even which country's flag should fly over the bases. Raising the volume over these issues were Philippine politicians, some of whom used the bases as a convenient way to burnish their nationalist credentials. Still, other Filipinos genuinely felt "slighted by the fact that the United States imposed tougher terms on the Philippines, its former colony and current ally, than it did on the Japanese, the former enemy, to acquire bases in Japan."³ And so, despite amendments to the bases treaty, the bases issue would remain a source of constant friction between the two allies throughout their existence.



Of course, the bases were only part of a far larger American relationship with the Philippines. After World War II, American aid helped to rebuild much of the war-scarred country. American multinational companies came to dominate much of the Philippine economy. American military support helped the Philippine national government hold in check guerrillas of various stripes. And the United States continued to be a factor in Philippine domestic politics. Even the success of Corazon Aquino's "people power" revolution in 1986 against the authoritarian regime of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos owed something to the intervention of the Reagan administration. In that case, the U.S. bases in the Philippines played a direct role, providing a sanctuary where rebel helicopters refueled and from which the United States ultimately ferried Marcos into exile. A few years later, President George H.W. Bush used the bases to support Aquino's new government against military coup plotters. He ordered American F-4 fighters from Clark Air Base to sweep over anti-government positions in a show of force and promised to terminate American aid if the coup plotters prevailed. The coup attempts petered out. Unsurprisingly, many Filipinos considered their country as one in a state of "dependent independence."

³ Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), p. 332.

Nevertheless, the late 1980s and early 1990s were an especially complicated time for the bases. The Military Bases Treaty was set to expire. And talks between Manila and Washington to create a new treaty to replace it dragged on. In 1988 Secretary of State George Schultz offered a \$491 million aid package to the Philippines to extend the existing treaty until September 1991 so that the two governments could continue to negotiate. Aquino agreed, though the amount was far less than what she originally requested. But by 1991 the Philippines and the United States managed to hammer out a new arrangement—the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Security—that would enable the United States to lease its main bases in the Philippines for another ten years. But when the treaty was brought to the Philippine Senate for ratification, a slim majority of senators voted it down. While some cited the potential presence of U.S. nuclear weapons (forbidden under the new Philippine constitution) on the bases as their reason for opposing the treaty, one senator summed up another motivation: “For me, it’s a new beginning of our history as a free people.”⁴

A little over a year later, the last American servicemen left the Philippines, hurried along by the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo and the concurrent arrival on a typhoon which covered Clark Air Base in a thick layer of wet ash. America’s 94-year military presence in the Philippines came to a close. Only the Mutual Defense Treaty remained. Though the Philippines and the United States established an annual exercise program in 1991, it was terminated a few years later. The mid-1990s marked a low point in the military relationship between Manila and Washington.

Then in 1995 China occupied and began to build permanent structures on Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef, one of a cluster of disputed islets in the South China Sea called the Spratly Islands. There was little Manila could do. Since the early 1960s, the Philippines had allowed its external defense capabilities wither. The end of the Military Bases Treaty made things worse. The Philippine air force could no longer depend on American maintenance support at Clark Air Base and the Philippine navy could no longer rely on military assistance credits from the United States for ships and spares. By the first decade of the new century, the air force would have no jet combat aircraft and the navy would have no ships capable of modern naval warfare. For decades, Manila had focused its resources against internal threats and relied on the United States (and its neighbors’ lack of power projection capabilities) to defend its external borders. However, by the late 1990s, China’s rapidly modernizing armed forces had begun to alter the strategic balance in Southeast Asia.

Around that time, the Philippine government began to reconsider the dismal state of its security relationship with Washington. And in 1999 the Philippine Senate ratified the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States, allowing American forces to reenter the country to conduct joint exercises with the Philippine military. Several Philippine senators, who had voted against the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Security eight years earlier, voted in favor of the VFA.⁵ Among them was Senator Juan Ponce Enrile, who drew a clear distinction between the two arrangements by noting that under the VFA “American soldiers [would] stay in the Philippines only temporarily.”⁶

The 9/11 attacks on the United States accelerated the restoration of U.S.-Philippine military ties. American troops were sent to the Philippines to assist in counterinsurgency operations across its southern islands, where militant Islamic groups—some with links to al-Qaeda—have long pursued autonomy from Manila. The two governments signed a new Mutual Logistics Support Agreement in 2002 to facilitate American deployments. By mid-decade, several hundred American troops were operating from Edwin Andrews Air Base near Zamboanga at a given time. Most have been members of the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines, which has helped improve the capacity of the Philippine Army’s 1st Special Forces Group. The rest are largely involved in the training of four light infantry battalions and two rapid-reaction companies.⁷

Nevertheless, Chinese behavior over its regional maritime claims grew more assertive. When China listed the South China Sea among its “core interests” (in other words, claims over which it is willing to fight) in 2010, Manila

⁴ Charles P. Wallace, “Manila Senate Rejects U.S. Pact,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sep. 16, 1991.

⁵ Philippine President Joseph Estrada was a leading advocate of the VFA with the United States, but was one of the senators who voted against the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Security in 1991. He often said that he voted against the treaty not because he disliked Americans, but because he loved Filipinos more. “I Am My Own Man: Joseph Estrada on how he will govern the Philippines,” *Asiaweek*, May 29, 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/98/0529/nat4.html>; Rigoberto Tiglao, “Growing Up,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Jun. 3, 1999, p. 27; James Hookway, “Manila Approves Accord on Links to U.S. Military,” *Wall Street Journal*, May, 28, 1999, p. A17.

⁶ “Plan to allow US, Japan military access to Phl bases met by opposition,” Philstar.com, Jun. 29, 2013, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2013/06/29/959812/news-analysis-plan-allow-us-japan-military-access-phl-bases-met>.

⁷ Thom Shanker, “U.S. Military to Stay in Philippines,” *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 2009.

decided it had to draw a line. The Philippines publicly admonished China's behavior at the following year's ASEAN Regional Forum. Then in 2012 when the Philippine navy confronted a flotilla of Chinese fishing boats near Scarborough Shoal and tried to arrest several fishermen who it claimed were illegally operating in Philippine waters, China responded by dispatching three surveillance ships to block the detention. That led to a tense two-month standoff. Eventually, the Philippines brought the issue to a United Nations tribunal, where it questioned the legality of Beijing's underlying claim to nearly the entire South China Sea under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. While Manila successfully put international pressure on China to clarify its maritime claims, China refused to participate in the proceedings and has not altered its behavior. A year on, an even larger flotilla of Chinese fishing and transport ships appeared off Philippine-claimed Second Thomas Shoal.

Such incidents have alarmed the Philippine government; so much so that it has begun to make its first meaningful investments in its external defense forces in decades. Thus far, Manila has procured two retired American Hamilton-class high-endurance cutters and will soon receive ten former Japanese patrol boats. Earlier this year it opened negotiations for a dozen South Korean FA-50 fighter/trainer aircraft. And it has even considered the purchase of two Maestrale-class frigates from Italy and the construction of a new naval base at Oyster Bay on Palawan Island (and very close to the Spratly Islands) to accommodate new Philippine warships.⁸ But apprehension over Chinese intentions has also led the Philippine government to draw even closer to the United States. It has clearly raised the profile of the annual joint U.S.-Philippine military exercise, whose scenarios have shifted from counterterrorism in 2002 to ones that have included the recapture of a small island in the last two years. Moreover, Manila has welcomed an increase in the number of U.S. Navy port calls at Subic Bay (now a Philippine naval base), including visits made by American nuclear attack submarines. It is against this backdrop that the IRP agreement is now being discussed.⁹

IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRP AGREEMENT

Beyond its political signal of enhanced solidarity between the Philippines and the United States, the IRP agreement addresses a number of issues for Manila. For some time, the Philippine government has wrestled with the vague language of its Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. The IRP agreement is expected to spell out in greater detail the responsibilities of the two countries and set up an annual forum at which they can discuss their security cooperation expectations. Manila hopes that this could provide the foundation for further military cooperation in the future.

Secondly, the agreement would give the Philippine armed forces breathing room for its military modernization. Since it will take time for the Philippines to acquire the military hardware that it needs for its external defense, the presence of fully-equipped American forces in the country would, in the interim, provide a welcome boost to its security. Thirdly, given the greater interaction the Philippine military would have with American troops if the IRP agreement is approved, it envisions that it could use the opportunity to not only enhance the interoperability of its forces with those of the United States, but also learn how to operate and maintain American combat equipment—equipment that it may procure. That way after such equipment is acquired; its forces can reach full operational capability more quickly.

However, not everyone in the Philippines is happy about the IRP agreement. Many Filipinos—even among those who recognize the security that American forces could bring with their presence—remain wary of semi-permanent American (or any foreign) troops on their soil. They argue that the agreement would degrade Philippine sovereignty, and some fear that, in the end, it would be the thin edge of a wedge that will lead to the return of de facto American military bases. Others oppose it on legal grounds. They regard it as a potential violation of the provision in the Philippine constitution that prohibits any foreign military presence without the concurrence of the Philippine Senate. And so they feel the government should bring the agreement to the Senate, like any other treaty, for a vote.¹⁰

⁸ Andrew R.C. Marshall and Manuel Mogato, "As Obama plans Asia tour, postcard Philippines isle symbolizes U.S. pivot," Reuters, Oct. 1 2013; By Philippines to buy 2 frigates from Italy," Agence France-Presse, Jul. 3, 2013.

⁹ In 2013 the annual joint military exercise between the Philippines and the United States, called Balikatan, included a scenario that involved the recapture of Batan Island in the Luzon Strait. Christopher McCullough, "US, Philippines partner for Exercise Balikatan 2013," Army.mil, May 3, 2013, http://www.army.mil/article/102588/US__Philippines_partner_for_Exercise_Balikatan_2013.

¹⁰ Section 25, Article XVIII of the Philippine constitution also stipulates that the other state, in this case the United States, involved in the agreement must also recognize it as a treaty, which under the U.S. Constitution would require it to be brought to the U.S. Senate for a vote. "News Analysis: Plan to allow U.S., Japan military forces access to Philippine bases met by strong opposition," *China*

Even so, Philippine President Benigno Aquino III has sought to expand Manila's security ties to other countries. While committed to the long-standing Philippine relationship with the United States, he has developed a new military relationship with Japan. In July 2012 the Philippines signed a little-known defense cooperation agreement with Japan. In so doing, the Philippines not only gained a helpful friend, but also weakened the view that it was simply (and reflexively) falling back on its Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. With the debate over the IRP agreement a year later, some have speculated whether a similar agreement would be struck with Japan. When asked about that possibility, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Voltaire Gazmin replied that "Japan is welcome to have joint military exercises with the Philippines," as long as a visiting forces agreement between the two countries is established beforehand.¹¹

For the United States, the IRP agreement helps demonstrate to the Philippines and the region its commitment to the Obama administration's oft-mentioned pivot or rebalance to Asia and to do so without the expense of building or maintaining new military installations. It also underscores American interest in maintaining regional stability and freedom of navigation through the South China Sea. But more broadly, it illustrates how the United States has benefitted from the growth of concerns over China's assertive behavior to enhance its military relationships and political stature in the region.

China, of course, sees the situation differently. Most in China see its difficulties with the Philippines as evidence of American meddling in the region. The IRP agreement is but one more example. The more charitable Chinese view is that America's pivot has created an environment in which the region's countries have become less willing to accommodate China's rise. Many Chinese imagined that as China's power grew, its neighbors would show more respect for its interests. Instead, America's pivot has led some countries, like the Philippines, to hedge against China, rather than accede to it. To those Chinese who see something more sinister in America's pivot believe that the United States is actively fostering hostility toward China in an effort to contain its rise. Seen in that light, the IRP agreement seems like a hardening of that containment policy. This summer, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs appeared to have subscribed to the latter view. In a response to the news that discussions had begun over the agreement, China warned that countries with territorial claims in the South China Sea that seek help from "third parties" would find their efforts "futile." Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi added that such a strategy was the "path of confrontation" and it would be "doomed."¹² That remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the Philippines and the United States continue to negotiate the IRP agreement. If successfully concluded, it would further cement the military relationship between the two countries. It clearly offers the United States a cost-effective way to enhance its presence in Asia, something that Washington has wanted to do for a long time. But the larger issue for the United States concerns the future of its alliances in the region. The same changes in the strategic environment that have caused Manila to edge closer to the United States have influenced other Asian capitals too. Some have adopted more explicit hedging strategies, like Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. Others continue to walk a fine line, like Indonesia and Malaysia. For the United States, it is surely nice to be wanted, but the calls for stronger ties also link Washington more closely to regional disputes whose future it has little ability to manage. The real legacy of the IRP agreement and America's Asian alliances may not emerge for years.

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Daily, Jun. 29, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2013-06-29/content_9452322.html.

¹¹ Adam Westlake, "Japan signs military agreement, pledges support for Philippines," *Japan Daily Press*, Jul. 09, 2012.

¹² Michael Martina and Terril Yue Jones, "Confrontation over the South China Sea 'doomed,' China tells claimants," Reuters, Jun. 27, 2013.