



THE PHILIPPINE-US ALLIANCE AND THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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A few days after it became apparent that Joe Biden would become the 46th president of the United States, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin announced that the Philippines would suspend its decision to abrogate the 1999 Philippine-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) for the second time so “that the two allies can work on a long-term mutual defense arrangement.” Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the additional six month-suspension of the VFA termination to “enable us to find a more enhanced, mutually beneficial, mutually agreeable and more effective and lasting agreement on how to move forward in our mutual defense.”

Locsin reasoned that in the last four years the situation in the South China Sea had changed from one of uncertainty about great powers’ intentions to “one of clarity where there is predictability and resulting stability with regard to what can and cannot be done.” The US Embassy in Manila immediately welcomed the decision, announcing that Washington will continue to partner closely with the Philippines to strengthen our mutual security ties.” The Biden

administration must seize this opportunity to right and consolidate an alliance that has been tottering in recent years. A stronger and rebalanced alliance will serve both countries’ interests as well as that of the entire region.

The Philippine-US Alliance in Retrospect

President Donald Trump used a transactional approach when dealing with European and Asian allies, pressuring these countries to contribute more financially toward their own security. His administration’s approach to the Philippine-US alliance, however, was different. It showed patience toward and understanding of Duterte’s sharp rhetoric questioning the alliance’s value.

In May 2017, Trump called Duterte to express Washington’s commitment to the 1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and his interest in developing a warm working relationship with him. Trump proved his worth during the battle for Marawi City that raged from May to October of that year. Washington provided Manila with state-of-the-art drones, assault rifles, ammunition, Gatling guns, and rubber boats. By the end of 2018, the allies’ activities—joint military exercises, arms transfers, intelligence exchanges, and training—had returned to levels before Duterte took office.

Challenges and Opportunities

It would be naïve for Manila to assume that security relations with Washington under Biden will be business as usual. There is the very real possibility that the incoming administration will raise the issue of human rights violations resulting from allegations of extrajudicial killings by the Philippine National Police (PNP) against small drug dealers and users as part of the Duterte administration’s war on drugs. A Biden presidency is also expected to focus on building up US defense capabilities while reemphasizing the importance of alliances and pressing ahead with efforts to constrain China’s expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. These will provide the two countries with opportunities not only to strengthen the defense relationship but expand it by addressing nontraditional security challenges such as

management of pandemics. This will require the two allies to:

Focus on constraining China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea. In February 2020, Duterte ordered the termination of the two-decade old VFA. However, an incident in which a People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) corvette directed its gun system at a Philippines Navy (PN) anti-submarine frigate (the BRP *Conrado Yap*) on May 17, and China's activation of research facilities on two artificial islands in the South China Sea convinced the Philippines that appeasement of China had reached its limits.

In September 2020, the Philippine military reported allegations of Chinese harassment of Philippine Air Force (PAF) reconnaissance aircraft flying near Scarborough Shoal. In reaction, Locsin declared in a TV interview that the Philippine would invoke the 1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) if China attacks any Philippine Navy (PN) ships in the South China Sea. He also claimed that "it would be in the Philippines' interests for the US to maintain its military presence in the region," reiterating that the country "never stopped cooperation" with its longtime and only treaty ally.

Locsin's statement marked the first time since 2016 that a ranking member of the Duterte administration publicly admitted that the country's defense posture depends on the Philippine-US alliance. This marked a shift in Philippines policy away from appeasing China to one more aligned with the US policy of challenging expansive Chinese claims in the South China Sea.

President-elect Biden has made no major public statement on South China Sea disputes. However, there is no indication that he will reverse the Trump administration's push back against Chinese maritime expansion and indeed might strengthen those efforts. Since becoming president-elect, Biden has been vocal against China's expansive claims in East Asia.

Duterte's decision to suspend VFA termination for another six months is intended to provide Manila and Washington time to discuss options on how to adjust their security relationship. Both sides can negotiate a more-equitable VFA and ways to generate impetus for

full implementation of the 2014 Enhance Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).

Work with other US allies to assist the Philippine military's modernization program. Since 2012, South Korea, Japan, and Australia have extended security assistance to the Philippine military, efforts that aided the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) modernization program. The Biden administration should work closely with those governments to ensure that assistance is coordinated and has the maximum effect at minimum cost. Philippine and US interests are served by a more confident, credible, and professional AFP, which would also discourage adventurism by other regional governments. Greater familiarity and operability with other US allies and partners would be a boon to security.

Manage the issue of human rights violations. The Biden administration can ensure that security relations with the Duterte administration are consistent with US calls for protecting human rights and adherence to the rule of law. Instead of publicly criticizing the Philippines, key officials can hold frank and candid closed-door discussions with Philippine counterparts on how to align the anti-drug campaign with the rule of law. Rather than threatening to withhold security assistance—which would diminish US influence on the police and the military—the Biden administration should explore means to support the shared goal of humanely managing drug addiction and halting the drug trade in the Philippines.

Expand the alliance by including health security as one of two allies' key security concerns. The Philippines and the US should incorporate health security within the scope of the alliance. Health security would involve developing preventive measures to protect against current and future infectious disease, distress caused by insufficient health care, and inadequate public infrastructure. Operationalization of health security in alliance policy will require cooperation in the securitization of Emerging Infectious Diseases (EIDS), and examining how management of infectious disease can converge with broader configuration of national security, joint military activities, and economic development. The Security Engagement Board (SEB) can provide the venue for the two allies to discuss how they can

incorporate health security within their overall security cooperation.

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