

A Relationship of Pivots: Philippine-US Cooperation in a Changing World

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A Relationship of Pivots: Philippine-US Cooperation in a Changing World

Abstract

As one of the few nations in the world (and the only one in the vicinity of China) to be a former colony of the United States, the Philippines is in a unique position on the world stage. This article delineates the history of the complex relationship between the Philippines and the United States since the Spanish-American war while placing an emphasis on modern relations. Since its independence to the end of the Cold War, the Philippines was unequivocally an ally to the United States, though this did not stop tensions from mounting. As China's contemporary foreign policy fosters further amicability between it and the Philippines under the Belt and Road Initiative, this has given rise to worries of a potential pivot to China. Furthermore, hostile sentiments conveyed from certain facets of the Philippines' leadership towards the United States accelerate these concerns. This article delves into the current relationship between the Philippines and the United States while outlining avenues for further cooperation via mutual benefit, particularly within the realm of developmental assistance.

Introduction

In 2017, various sources (most notably from the private-sector) announced the foundations of a new megacity project in the Philippines —The City of Pearl.¹ Named after the antiquated nickname for Manila as “the pearl of the orient,” this proposed urban center is set to be anything but a reminder of the past. Purportedly hosting the likes of golf courses, sports stadiums, and high rises—all intertwined with artificial intelligence creating a “smart city.”² The project was set to involve 407 hectares of mostly reclaimed land off the bay of Manila. Though the project is by no means unilateral, the chief architectural firm regarding its construction is Hong Kong-based company—Ho and Partners Architects Engineers & Development Consultants Limited. Meanwhile, the chief construction firm is UAA Kinming Development Corporation, a Manila-based company created solely for the city's development, but with heavy involvement from the Hong Kong-based Kho Group and a “major Chinese state-owned conglomerate named ‘mother company.’”³

A similar incipit project in the Philippines is that of New Clark City, a green-smart megacity of similar scale to The City of Pearl but without any focus on land reclamation or coastal proximity.⁴ Though these two projects are not exclusively funded through Chinese sources, they may easily be considered as extensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since their respective unveilings, the level of development regarding both projects has underperformed expectations, inviting worry from observers. These sentiments may be stemming from the rapid development of projects in the same vicinity, such as Forest City Johor in Malaysia or International City in Sri Lanka.

Despite differences in levels of development, lead architect of The City of Pearl, Nicholas Ho, has stated that it is his goal to complete the city “in seven phases over 20 years.”⁵ With longer timetables, worry regarding stagnation and falling short on benchmarks when compared to other BRI projects become less salient. Though maritime disputes and worries regarding employment have created tension between Manila and Beijing in recent years, bilateral agreements in the name of investment and development reign strong between the two nations as cooperation accelerates.

Ever extending cooperation between China and the Philippines may foster fears that relations between the United States and the Philippines are set to deteriorate. Relations between the two countries had certainly begun to sour within the past decade, with one prominent example being the attempted annulment of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) by the Duterte administration.⁶ The claim that this potential annulment signifies a major pivot away from the United States and towards China is reductive, however. The immense history that the Philippines and the United States share as allies and current linkages of cooperation may serve to bolster their mutual friendship. As the grandiosity of Philippine-US relations carries profound implications on both countries, it is imperative that the United States engage further with such matters, rather than pursuing a more distant approach.

History of Philippine-U.S. Relations

Initially colonized by the Spanish Empire in the 16th century under the rule of King Philip II (hence the namesake), the Philippine Islands had its ownership transferred to the United States of America following the Spanish-American war of 1898.⁷ Rather than holistically taking the Philippines as “spoils of war,” the United States purchased the islands and eliminated the nascent republic that had formed in the short period following Spain's absence. The Philippines would remain a colony of the United States until after the conclusion of World War II in 1946. Though the United States and the Philippines presently support bilateral cooperation, the treatment of the Philippines as an American colony was largely one of exploitation, marring prospects for development.

Examples of this exploitation include an emphasis on profitability for individuals of American origin at the expense of Filipino natives, stamping out calls for democracy, and utilizing a media campaign that “defin[ed] Filipino identity as savage”.⁸ It is impossible to undo the adversity inflicted on the Philippines by colonial practices, but it is not only possible—yet also advisable—for the prospects of bilateral cooperation that future measures placate the wellbeing of the people of the Philippines as well. Following the nation's independence in 1946, Manila and Washington formed an alliance that was contingent upon mutual defense.⁹ The 1951 Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA) between the two countries, affirming that one would support the other if an attack was to take place, solidified the alliance

between the two nations.¹⁰ Against the backdrop of the Cold War, where the specter of war was ever prominent, the MDA cemented the Philippines as not only a U.S. ally —but a close one. The MDA remains in place today, with its resilience serving as an analog for the resilience of friendship between the two nations. Despite being signed over 70 years ago, the MDA carries prominence to today with Anthony Blinken under the Biden administration vocally reaffirming U.S. commitment to the agreement in 2021.¹¹

In regards to economics, the Philippines Statistics Authority shows that yearly investment from the United States has fluctuated within the past 10 years, peaking at roughly \$80 billion under the Obama administration, dropping to figures ranging from \$10 billion to \$30 billion under the Trump administration, and now surpassing the \$30 billion figure with an upward trajectory under the Biden administration.¹² Meanwhile, according to data concerning foreign trade on census.gov, annual exports to the Philippines have hovered near \$8 billion and annual imports have risen from \$9 billion to \$12 billion since 2011 to 2020; figures in 2021 were \$9 billion for exports and \$14 billion for imports, revealing another upward trend.¹³ The presence of the United States as a large stakeholder in the Philippine economy as well as trends of increasing investment highlight the importance of cooperation between the two countries. These factors also underline the current outlook of increased interaction between the two countries. However, the emergence of China in the Belt and Road Initiative may come to rival the United States' place.

History of China-Philippine Relations

The United States has certainly had a closer relationship with the Philippines for the past century, but China's history with the nation extends much further into the past. As early as the Song Dynasty, the Chinese Empire and the Philippines retained significant levels of maritime trade.¹⁴ Under Spanish rule, trade between the Philippines and China expanded greatly due to the opening of new trade routes. As economic interaction between China and the Philippines flourished, so did cultural interaction, thus intertwining the two in a manner that the United States could never partake in.

Under the contemporary world order of the Cold War, the Philippines had chosen the side of the United States, thus brewing hostility between it and Communist China prior to the Sino-Soviet split. After the split, relations between the two countries changed with a newfound fondness, signaled by increased trade.¹⁵ This amicability still was not enough to divorce the Philippines from the American sphere of influence, however. Upon the end of the Cold War, the absence of the Soviet Union led to the proliferation of the notion that ideological blocs and international camps were no longer necessary in conducting global politics. Under this novel sentiment, China could bolster its ties with nations such as the Philippines and it would do little to disrupt the contemporary geopolitical order. Barring the past decade, the gradual bolstering of relations between China and the Philippines reached its apex in 2007 during the visit of Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, under what Philippine President Macapagal-Arroyo declared as the “golden age of partnership.”¹⁶

United States Development Efforts in the Philippines

In the context of American rebuilding efforts after an immensely destructive World War II, the Europe-focused Marshall Plan stands as the most salient. In 1946, Washington enacted a similar plan in the Philippines under the name Bell Trade Act, which secured \$800 million in funds to rebuild the Philippines and lay down the groundwork for future prosperity. This act was not without its strings, however, as it effectively forced the Philippines to surrender much of its national sovereignty. Under this act, the United States boasted far more control over the Philippines’ currency exchange rate and gave preferential treatment to American businesses, with one contemporary suggesting that “the United States is actually in a stronger position in the Philippines although the islands are independent now.”¹⁷ The predatory nature of this act was lessened extensively upon its revision with the Laurel-Langley agreement of 1955, lasting up until 1974, giving a more just (though still far from perfect) share of prosperity to the archipelago.¹⁸

One obstacle in further cooperation has long been the limit of foreign ownership of land in the Philippines to 40 percent, among other restrictions.¹⁹ Though this restriction may act as a barrier on the premises regarding profitability for outside investors, there is a clear justification for the contentious nature of the Philippines’ actions towards maintaining

national sovereignty. Despite Washington currently lacking with physical infrastructure investment in the Philippines, the advancement of electronic infrastructure (particularly regarding the establishment of 5G) poses itself as a prominent linkage.

With the 2019 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, of which the United States was an observer, it was noted in a formal dialogue that “[t]hree main partners have emerged for ASEAN to help strengthen cybersecurity: Japan, the United States, and the European Union.”²⁰ Additionally, the United States and a large Philippine telecommunications firm signed an agreement for a \$1 million contract regarding the expansion of 5G, a staple of a possible emergent trend between the two nations.²¹ As the Philippines transitions into an upper-middle-income economy, access to the internet for the majority of citizens is a certain eventuality and one that must be met with meticulous planning of potential infrastructure, further highlighting the importance of concerted efforts.

Moreover, cooperation has also emerged in the realm of vaccinations for the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Despite China's global reach of Sinovac vaccines and the Philippines' integration in the BRI, the United States has taken the lead in distributing vaccines with over 33.3 million given through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access program as of March 2022.²² Finally, according to the United States Agency for International Development, levels of humanitarian aid also remain high, with a figure of \$4.5 billion total assistance with the official goal of development.²³

China-Philippine Relations in the Modern Era

In 2013, Beijing announced the One Belt One Road Initiative. As of today, the One Belt One Road Initiative has largely transformed into the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI. Given its proximity, one of the BRI's largest regions of focus is Southeast Asia. Yearly investment from China to the Philippines has fluctuated during the past 5 years from below \$10 billion to almost \$90 billion, and the most recent figure is resting at \$15 billion.²⁴ Trade figures between China and the Philippines have an upward trajectory however, with total bilateral trade reaching almost \$50 billion with an annualized growth rate of roughly 17 percent over the past 5 years.²⁵ Such cooperation is not universal, however, as the initial period of

the BRI was marred by a new development between China and the Philippines—a territorial dispute in the South China Sea. Affirmations from Beijing regarding China's historic maritime claims to the Spratley Islands upset officials in the Philippines as these claims encroached directly upon its sovereign territory. China did not budge on the issue, however, and the case was eventually settled in The Hague under a tribunal determined by the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²⁶ After three years of heavy deliberation, the tribunal determined that China did not have rightful jurisdiction over these islands, but the ruling was vehemently rejected by Chinese officials who claimed it to be an “external provocation.”²⁷

Despite the increasing tensions, in 2017 (one year after Duterte's inauguration), the Philippines' partnership in the BRI was “affirmed and welcomed” by Chinese officials.²⁸ Accompanied with this partnership came a slew of BRI projects that have not ceased in its reach, with more prominent ones being the aforementioned City of Pearl and New Clark City. As a result of new BRI projects, many fear a phenomenon in which Beijing pursues infrastructure projects with the goal of crippling the target country with debt and therefore gaining large sums of equity in its markets, a form of neo-colonialism known colloquially as debt-trap diplomacy. The existence of debt-trap diplomacy is a controversial matter, though what is not is the existence of fears surrounding the phenomenon, and it is evident that such fears may go on to shape further interactions between Philippine and Chinese officials.

As a democracy, public sentiment bears importance in the Philippines' politics, and the unpopularity of China does little to support relations between the two countries (despite contemporary President Duterte's positive sentiments). Furthermore, an influx of migrant workers from mainland China has accompanied an influx of investment as well. There is no issue with this premise alone, but conflict arises due to the externality that “Chinese investors preferred to employ Chinese workers in order to overcome the language barrier.”²⁹ Unfortunately, such developments in the Philippine job market (combined with disputes in the South China Sea) have cultivated a level of Sinophobia that currently afflicts Filipinos of Chinese descent (commonly known as Tsinoys) and recent mainland immigrants alike.

Internal Politics of the Philippines Regarding Development

The Build Build Build (BBB) program from the Duterte administration seeks to accelerate the already extant growth found in the nation's recent history. This project goes hand in hand with the Philippine Development Plan (PDP), and though it is not without its flaws, these internal efforts have enjoyed great success. The Philippines' modern economy's faculties that provide strong bases for foreign direct investment (FDI) are reflected in its gross domestic product growth from 2012 to 2019, consistently achieving figures between 6 percent and 7 percent.³⁰ "The Philippines has moved in recent years to liberalize several sectors of the economy to simulate foreign direct investment," thus opening the door for investment from other countries, most notably the United States, China, and Japan.³¹

As internal politics may play a role of gatekeeping or possibly guiding prospective investment, it may be prudent to promote potential projects that do more to uplift the general populous. As shown in a working paper dissecting the machinations of the BBB initiative from the Philippine Institute of Development Studies, there is a distinct lack of "PDP targets in the area of social infrastructure (e.g., [sic] school buildings and health facilities)," highlighting a potential area to focus U.S. efforts.³² Additional suggested types of investment include those concerning environmental sustainability with goals of reducing pollution and mitigating climate change. The official website for the BBB program boasts lofty promises, among which are reducing poverty by 25 percent by 2022 and making infrastructure a top priority of the government.³³ Though these ideals may be little more than campaign promises from Duterte, clear positive sentiments towards development from the nation's leadership bodes well for the future of interconnectivity and globalization for the Philippines.

In June of 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. succeeded Rodrigo Duterte as President.³⁴ The Marcos Jr. platform largely boasts a continuation of Duterte's policies (as made evident by his comments on Duterte's style of governance as well as his Vice-Presidential candidate being Duterte's daughter).³⁵ While these reasons point to a continuation of pro-China rhetoric, the Marcos Jr. platform is much more flexible than Duterte's and popular support for cooperation between Washington and Manila may reflect in future policies, furthering prospects for U.S. engagement. Though Duterte's exit from the presidency may prelude fundamental

changes in Manila's patterns of governance, Marcos Jr.'s status as the son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. casts dubious prospects on potential amelioration of democracy and consequently further disincentivizes U.S. distancing.

Obstacles to Overcome

One reason Chinese investment through the BRI is creating such a grand impact is its larger scale when compared to U.S. investment. Currently, Chinese investment in the Philippines dwarfs American investment due to a combination of action from Beijing and a lack of action from Washington. In 2019, the Trump administration unveiled the Blue Dot Network, placing a figurative blue dot on greenlit projects that met sustainability goals and promoted good governance in recipient countries. The budget of this initiative for the entirety of Indo-Pacific is \$60 billion, which is simply not enough when compared to other actors in the region (not only China, but countries like Japan as well).³⁶ The Blue Dot Network has since joined the Biden administration's Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, largely remaining in its original functionality.

As the Philippines and the United States have enjoyed an alliance for much of the past century, complacency and insularity from the American side in the face of a more open Philippines is perhaps the largest obstacle to overcome. Vocal remarks, often directly from Duterte himself, were the most prominent indicator of cracks in the relationship between the United States and the Philippines, beginning shortly after his inauguration in June of 2016. Later that year, Duterte expressed interest to "break up with America," along with several disparaging expletives directed at U.S. President Barack Obama.³⁷ These comments, accompanied with the initiation of the process for abrogation for the VFA between the two nations in 2020, painted a bleak picture of deteriorating relations. However, Duterte has largely refrained from such crass remarks against American officials in recent years, meanwhile, Manila has restored the VFA shortly after its suspension with new terms.³⁸ With the potential for future cooperation being so great, Washington should view hiccups and obstacles as challenges to overcome, rather than deterrents.

Past U.S. Administrations' Relationships with the Philippines and Trajectory Under Biden

Despite Duterte's history of animosity towards Washington, the Obama administration largely held on to aims of keeping the Philippines as an ally. As it has continuously been emblematic of U.S. policy to support democracy abroad and not mar friendships of nations in a region as pivotal as Southeast Asia, the U.S. side has done little to further destabilize the relationship between the two countries. Prior to Duterte, Obama and former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III had cooperated extensively. The most prominent of this cooperation was the bifurcated effort in economic cooperation (mainly through the Partnership for Growth) and cooperation in national security (primarily through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement).³⁹ While Duterte's profane remarks against Obama led the U.S. President to cancel a planned meeting, the relationship between the two leaders was restored during the 2016 ASEAN summit after they had a chance to properly get acquainted with one another.⁴⁰

Under the Trump administration, the allyship between Manila and Washington had changed profoundly. As both Trump and Duterte facilitated a base of right-wing populism, forwarding dogma against perceived threats such as immigration and the drug trade, there was some apparent congruence in policies. However, these styles of governance by way of promoting nationalistic rhetoric proved harmful to international cooperation, a trend exacerbated by a continuation of Duterte's actions. Decreased economic engagement was tantamount to a perceived cessation of the VFA, to which Trump responded with approval and a compliment towards Duterte's leadership.⁴¹

The Biden administration has marked a significant change in trajectory as seen by the diminishing of isolationist policies. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document, published in 2021, details the Biden administration's views pertaining to foreign policy, placating pro-democratic and anti-isolationist positions.⁴² Though the document does not explicitly name the Philippines, it does name members of ASEAN and prioritizes them for deepened cooperation. This document also details the importance of protecting democratic governance abroad and its proliferation. As fears of democratic backsliding persist within the Marcos Jr. regime, increased levels of congruence could bolster democracy in the Philippines.⁴³ It is under this framework that closer ties with the

Philippines are not only compatible within the Biden administration's goals, but complementary to them.

Finally, the state.gov website on November 16th of 2021 published an official press release was published detailing a Joint Vision for a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership. This press release detailed current desires for greater cooperation with the Philippines through aims such as shared prosperity, legitimizing a laws-based maritime order, and enhancing the extant security architecture in the region.⁴⁴ Given these documents, it is evident that the current U.S. administration under Biden seeks a stronger partnership with the Philippines.

Advantages and Mechanisms of Greater Economic Engagement

The increased economic engagement from the United States towards the Philippines may precipitate through increasing the ease of access for investments (as well as incentives for these investments) and increasing investment directly from U.S. government institutions. While there are many applicable institutions towards this end, the two most pertinent are the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation. Though current investment efforts are in place, particularly concerning the previously mentioned \$60 billion through the B3W initiative, this amount encompasses the entire Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁵ Given the potential for an imbalance of investment in the region, it would be prudent to set investment goals for the Philippines in particular. This increased cooperation would enhance the ties between Washington and Manila as well as bolster the Philippines' economic infrastructure. Added economic infrastructure would lead to increased gross domestic product and lead to lower prices for goods as volume would increase along with capacity for manufacturing, creating better outcomes for American consumers as well.⁴⁶

Furthermore, advancements in manufacturing infrastructure in the Philippines detracts leverage from China as a manufacturing hegemon and makes the United States less reliant on them. Through policies such as Made in China 2025, there is a clear focus within Beijing's governance to diminish its dependence on other countries, highlighting a phenomenon where China becomes less reliant on the world, but the world remains reliant on China.⁴⁷ This phenomenon spells out a mismatch of leverage

between the United States and China regarding trade negotiations, but greater economic involvement in other countries—namely the Philippines—could counter rising influence from Beijing. As the relationship that the United States has with the Philippines is far friendlier than with China, the Philippines’ prospective role as a regional manufacturing hub bodes well for trade between the two countries. Additionally, economic investment does not need to only encompass manufacturing as there is great potential for a comprehensive approach, incorporating other fields such as the service sector and tech.⁴⁸ In summation, increased economic cooperation between the United States and the Philippines give both nations increased leverage in the global economy, improves the domestic market for both, and sets the groundwork for an enhanced mutually beneficial friendship.

Advantages of Greater Military Cooperation in a Geopolitical Context

As China gains more influence in Southeast Asia through the BRI, the influence of the United States is ostensibly waning. Increased military cooperation between the United States and the Philippines would directly undermine this perception. In Southeast Asia, a region rife with democratic backsliding, the image of United States influence waning would only exacerbate this trend. Another benefit of greater military cooperation is advancement in both countries’ wars on terrorism, as counterterrorism efforts have often been a catalyst for past engagement.⁴⁹ Terrorism in the region of Southeast Asia primarily takes two forms: Pirates and Islamic extremists. Piracy has established itself as a salient issue in the vicinity, with prominence in the Sulu Sea, the body of water that surrounds the southern half of the Philippines.⁵⁰ Piracy in Southeast Asia has declined in recent years, but the extant state of it harms prospects of the safety of human lives as well as shipping lanes in the region.⁵¹ Greater involvement from the United States can accelerate this decline, mitigating risk and enhancing cooperation.

Furthermore, the Islamic State’s presence in the Philippine province of Mindanao and history of terrorist attacks highlight a pressing issue in the region as well as a clear intersection with the U.S.’ war on terror.⁵² Finally, the most effective manner to enforce legal norms is through precedence, and increased military presence would enhance the legitimacy of

territorial boundaries as established in international law. Where this concept is pertinent is the case of the South China Sea as the current U.S. administration has explicitly recognized the 2016 UNCLOS ruling against China's claims in the region (as made evident in the November 2021 document).⁵³ Even if the Duterte regime did not express much interest in the ruling (and if this perspective continues under Marcos Jr.), the contentious nature of this subject paired with the Philippines' democratic foundations prelude a potential future administration where it will. Increased involvement would not only assist in the legitimacy of this ruling but for the foundations of the global rules-based maritime order that the seas are contingent on, providing a basis of regional security.

Consequences of Potential Distancing and Drawbacks of Cooperation

There is a fundamental question as to whether an enhanced partnership between Washington and Manila is worth the potential downsides. Though the advantages are vast, the disadvantages exist to an extent and deserve acknowledgement to achieve a holistic view on the subject. The most conspicuous disadvantage is the potential for economic loss. The nature of investment pursues returns (in addition to recuperation) but investing in developing economies always carry extra risk. If investment is to be processed as Official Development Assistance, then the potential for return is lessened, but the terms of these loans create a more advantageous situation for the Philippines and its economy.⁵⁴ Despite this notion, investing in developing economies (even when prioritizing facets such as capacity building and sustainability) have been consistently shown to be "safe investment vehicles."⁵⁵

Moreover, the Philippines' role as a burgeoning economy while reliance on China decreases bodes well concerning prospective advancement. Pitfalls are inevitable in this respect, but the potential for mutual economic gain, advancements in positions of leverage, and the decreased threat of piracy make cooperation a net positive. Another possible criticism of contemporary efforts regarding cooperation is perceived adulation of Duterte/ Marcos Jr. and an erosion of democratic principles. However, an abandonment of the Philippines as a country due to this erosion would only more so push the nation towards China, a regional hegemon with little respect for democracy. Duterte's attitude towards China is not permanent, and neither are current lapses in democratic governance. As

Marcos Jr. succeeds Duterte, new policies and alterations towards the Philippines' government are on the horizon. Given these developments, a closer relationship with the United States as a proponent of democracy creates the best hope for the proliferation of such ideals.

Conclusion and the Path Forward

Internal politics and contemporary economic frameworks from Manila characterize an inclination towards global interconnectivity and FDI. Though disparaging remarks from the Duterte administration have arisen, investment through internal and external means maintains a distinguished goal of Manila's governance. As China increases its investment abroad through BRI projects, cooperation between Beijing and Manila will proliferate (though growing social straining and territorial disputes may impede these efforts). The rise of China in the Philippines' politics should not be an invitation for Washington to distance itself from Manila, but rather an invitation for the United States to extend its own developmental faculties in the nation.

As mentioned previously, projects such as the City of Pearl and New Clark City are not holistically unilateral. Increased engagement has the potential to lay the groundwork for the empowering of both countries' economies, a step towards victory in the war on terror, and increased leverage for both countries in the global market. With engagement and friendship prioritized, the framework for a stronger Philippine-United States relationship may advance through the means of common prosperity for the peoples of both nations.

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