Strengthening the US–Philippine Alliance

Renato Cruz De Castro
INTRODUCTION

How should the Philippines and the United States reconfigure their alliance to face the changing security challenges of the 21st century? This question of “alliance management” brings forth the challenge of how to maintain an alliance after the initial security threat that prompted its creation has been overcome, and the alliance’s underlying rationale cancelled.

Alliance durability is the result of a number of factors. These include, for instance, a re-formulation of threat perceptions as well as a process of institutionalization. In order to ascertain the viability of an alliance, such as that between the US and the Philippines, it is vital to understand how these factors have been operating.

A key challenge for alliance management is to maintain the relationship once its initial raison d’être has passed. This has been a major question facing the US–Philippine alliance for much of the post–Cold War period.

With the attacks of 9/11, the two countries found a powerful reason, in the fight against international terrorism, to strengthen their alliance. More recently, another security challenge has begun to emerge – the rise of China.

China’s assertiveness, which has become increasingly clear to the Philippines, has prompted further changes in the alliance. Yet China’s rise is a long-term, complex challenge requiring deeper cooperation into the future.

THE THREAT OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

The tragic events of 9/11 in the US brought to light a major new security challenge for the first decade of the 21st century – international terrorism. These attacks demonstrated the lethalness of what was a well-orchestrated terrorist act.

Terrorism also bedevilled the Philippines during the early 1990s. A fairly new and notorious terrorist group, Abu Sayyaf, staged several spectacular high-profile hostage seizures in Mindanao. The group called for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by sharia law and a religious agenda far more radical than the one espoused by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It was also linked with international terrorist networks, prompting the Philippines government to allocate enormous resources to ensure its eradication.

These changes, and the subsequent American-led counter-terrorism coalition, provided a powerful impetus for alliance revitalization. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s support for the global campaign against terrorism put Manila back on Washington’s policy-making radar, with the Philippines becoming one of the priority nations to receive US security assistance as America expanded its counter-terrorism operations.

FROM COUNTER-TERRORISM TO CHINA CHALLENGE

Yet a more traditional security challenge has also begun to emerge. Increasing Chinese naval intrusions into Philippine waters have been observed, while the level of diplomatic pressure coming from China over its territorial claims is also rising.

In the eyes of many in Southeast Asia, China is returning to a more “assertive posture,” consolidating its territorial claims while expanding its military. China’s actions are increasingly viewed as undermining other states’ claims through an approach based on “coercive diplomacy.”
In 2009, Chinese naval and fishing vessels harassed the USNS *Impeccable*, which was conducting surveying operations in the South China Sea. In 2010, China warned the US to respect its extensive claims in the area; China would not tolerate any interference since the zone was part of the country’s "core interests."

China’s recent assertiveness has also become obvious to the Philippines. In 2009, the Philippine government passed the Republic Act 9522, or the Philippine Baseline Law. The Law was part of the process of the Philippines meeting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea deadline for countries and archipelagic states to submit their respective claims to their extended shelves and exclusive economic zone. By passing such a law, the Philippines was reaffirming its claim over the disputed Kalayaan Island Group and Scarborough Shoal, both also claimed by China.

China filed a diplomatic protest in response, declaring the Philippines’ claim as invalid and illegal. It then deployed a fishery patrol vessel to the area before sending more patrol vessels, allegedly to curb illegal fishing.

To the Philippines, China appeared to be consolidating its maritime claims while undermining the claims of others. Senior members of the Philippines’ senate accused China of moving toward an act of aggression. There was also a push for the development of an improved system of border surveillance.

**INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

A new threat is not in itself sufficient to hold an alliance together. The fostering of ongoing cooperation between allies depends on formal organizational structures, some tasked with decision-making and others with specific functions. These structures provide allies with incentives to maintain open channels of communication; in the long run, they create capabilities and benefits that can ensure the alliance’s survival when circumstances change.

Prior to 1992, Philippine–US security relations were kept intact by several agreements. The two became formal allies in 1951 when they signed the Philippines–US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). They also became members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. However, the most important of these arrangements was the 1947 Philippines–US Military Bases Agreement, under which the Philippines would host major American naval and air facilities.

With the withdrawal of these American military facilities in 1992, the alliance assumed a different form. It would subsequently be institutionalized through the Philippines–US Mutual Defense Board (MDB), as well as through the Security Engagement Board for non-traditional security challenges. The MDB, for example, is tasked with formulating measures or arrangements to carry out more effectively the MDT’s specified purposes and objectives.
Alliance institutionalization improved dramatically after 9/11, leading to more joint-training, weapons acquisitions and joint policy formulation. By comparison, the more recent developments in the region have contributed to a slower but no less significant transformation.

Most importantly, after having long attended to internal security when considering institutional change, the alliance has begun to refocus on territorial defense. At the MDB meeting in 2010, discussions ranged not only over counter-terrorism and insurgency, but also over maritime security and potential flashpoints, such as the Spratlys.

Complementarity and inter-operability between the two armed services have been two key changes driven by these new circumstances. In January 2011, the two sides discussed the need to upgrade their mutual capabilities in maritime security. Greater US assistance was a key part of this dialogue.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

The Philippines–US alliance remains cohesive in the face of a changing regional environment. Yet China’s emergence is a long-term, complex, security challenge, which suggests that alliance revitalization alone may not be sufficient. The alliance would benefit for instance from closer links to America’s other bilateral relationships in the Asia-Pacific, such as the US–Japan, US–South Korea, or US–Australia alliances.

Such a move would not only increase cooperation against new traditional and non-traditional security problems, but would also engender a shared political identity. It would contribute strongly in other areas as well, such as to the promotion of liberal democracy or open and free markets. If Washington is to transform what have been separate bilateral alliances into a more region-wide approach, however, it must increase its economic and social cooperation with its Asia-Pacific allies, including the Philippines.

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