

75 Years of Philippines-US Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Multifaceted Relationship

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The Philippines and the United States have signed more than one hundred agreements, conventions, and treaties since diplomatic relations began on July 4, 1946. This process has shown the evolution of relations from a strategic military and economic partnership into a multifaceted relationship encompassing cultural, social, and governance cooperation.

Maria Elissa J. Lao, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Ateneo de Manila University, and **Severo Madrona Jr.**, Lecturer, Department of History, Ateneo de Manila University, explain how US-Philippine Relations evolved "from a strategic military and economic partnership into a multifaceted relationship encompassing cultural, social, and governance cooperation."

Strategic Partnership for a Newly Independent State (1946-1956)

The first ten years of post-independence Philippines-US relations focused on forging strong military and economic arrangements between the two countries. Continued ties with the United States were one of the guideposts in Philippine diplomacy, as Philippine President Manuel A. stated: "We are committed to the cause and the international program of the United States of America... For our part, we cannot but place our trust in the good intentions of the nation, which has been our friend and protector for the past 48 years. To do otherwise would be to forswear all faith in democracy, in our future, and in ourselves." As a result, the period was characterized by agreements relating to diplomatic and consular relations (Treaty of General Relations), economics and technical cooperation (Joint American-Philippine Financial Commission), and military affairs (Military Bases Agreement, Military Assistance Agreement, and Mutual Defense Treaty).

These agreements constituted the basis of the "special relationship" between the Philippines and the United States in the post-colonial period. The nature of this relationship was heavily influenced by two security arrangements: the Military Bases Agreement (MBA) and the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), along with the Philippines declaration of its military alliance with the United States as the Cold War emerged.

Reexamination and Reorientation of the Special Relationship (1957-1986)

The subsequent period saw the special relationship between the Philippines and the United States evolve into one of more circumspection. Several factors spurred the re-evaluation of bilateral relations: (a) meager US economic assistance to the Philippines when compared to India and other countries; (b) failure to resolve the Philippines' financial and veterans claim against the United States; (c) the lack of assurance for defense and security as illustrated by the absence of an automatic retaliation clause in the MDT; and (d) the jurisdiction disputes over US military bases in the Philippines.

The persistence of these issues strained bilateral relations and saw the Philippines pivot towards strengthening diplomatic ties with select new partner countries. For example, closer relationships were forged with neighboring Southeast Asian countries, culminating in the establishment of a regional bloc—the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). In addition to labor migration cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, the Philippines entered diplomatic and economic arrangements with the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and some African states.

Manila's diplomatic maneuvers did not go unnoticed by the United States. In response and recognizing the strategic importance of the Philippines in the Pacific region, the United States agreed to reexamine military and economic arrangements between the two countries. For example, the Bohlen-Serrano Agreement amended the MBA to address Philippine concerns over criminal jurisdiction and shortened the lease of the American military

bases from 99 to 25 years (1966–1991). While there was no amendment to the MDT, US officials continuously assured the Philippines of defense and security protection against possible foreign attacks. In a series of high-level negotiations, the United States also agreed to increase military and economic assistance to the Philippines. Likewise, long-standing Philippine financial claims were resolved in 1973 and transformed into cultural, agricultural, and educational funds. Equally, both countries also entered fiscal and economic arrangements, addressing double taxation, agricultural cooperation, air transportation, and other issues.

Multilateral Development Diplomacy (1986-1998)

In the two presidential terms after popular protest and civil resistance ousted President Ferdinand Marcos from a 20-year dictatorship (Corazon C. Aquino, 1986–1992, and Fidel V. Ramos, 1992–1998) leaders sought to usher the Philippines into an era of independent foreign relations, which was marked by a more diverse relationship between the Philippines and the United States in terms of functional cooperation. During this period, agreements between the Philippines and the United States included law enforcement, finance, trade, defense, telecommunications, postal, and intellectual property rights. Also, during this period, the Philippines' shifted its foreign policy orientation towards "development diplomacy," a policy that marshaled all available resources to advantage the nation vis-à-vis opportunities abroad in critical sectors of trade, investment, finance, technology, and aid. The policy sought to secure economic benefits and propel the growth of the Philippine political economy. Economic diplomacy meant enhanced bilateral relations and participation in multilateral global trade and investment discussions, including participation in the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Both the Philippines and the United States visibly participated in bodies such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) with the Philippines hosting the 1996 APEC Summit in Subic, the site of a former US navy base.

Enhancement of US-Philippines diplomatic relations (1998-present)

After the presidencies of Aquino and Ramos, the enhancement of diplomatic ties continued with a notable increase in the functional areas of cooperation and exchange. Though the largest number of agreements still fell within the area of defense and are discussed in depth in [Leslie V. Advincula-Lopez's contribution to this special series on US-Philippine relations](#), agreements also spanned many sectors outside of defense, including telecommunications, environmental protection, energy, education, agriculture, and transportation. Especially noteworthy achievements include the Partnership for Growth and the Millennium Challenge Account Compact (2011), which provides governance-related support for inclusive growth, and the Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (2012). A subsequent agreement was signed in 2019 in the areas of public health, marine sciences, environmental protection, and energy.

This period also saw the return to Category 1 status of the Philippines in 2014, which improved aviation options for Philippine carriers operating in US territories. Ties between the two countries were further strengthened by a diverse range of cooperation, including existing and new sister city arrangements that underscore specific and unique links between specific geographic areas. In addition, person-to-person ties have been strengthened through Filipino-Americans' efforts via communities in the US and their networks.

Conclusion

The Philippines and the United States relationship in the post-independence period have evolved from focused interventions to a dynamic exchange over issues of mutual importance. While there remains the traditional basis of security and military-related agreements, even the evolution of the Mutual Defense Treaty has seen cooperation over new functional areas, including disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and counter-terrorism measures. Moreover, collaboration across a diverse array of economic sectors is emblematic of the growing relationship that is further strengthened by multiple generations of Filipino Americans who contribute to both the United States and the Philippines in various areas of expertise.

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