

Abrogating the Visiting Forces Agreement: Its Effects on Philippines' Security and Stability in Southeast Asia

By Renato Acosta

Renato Acosta, a senior reporter for the BusinessMirror, a daily business newspaper in the Philippines, explains that "while Duterte's attempt to end the security arrangement is already a part of contemporary history, its significance should not be dismissed. It is an important event to understand for posterity..."

During much of 2022, the defense and security alliance between the United States of America and the Philippines, anchored on and reinforced by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT, teetered on the brink of collapse. Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte brought relations to the brink through attempts to scuttle the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). This move would only embolden Chinese challenges to Manila's territorial integrity and its aspirations to dominate Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. While the Duterte administration recited parochial reasons to terminate the VFA, pundits from the security and diplomatic sectors viewed Duterte's attempts as a pretext to steer the Philippines towards China under his own brand and definition of an independent foreign policy.

During his term, Duterte reiterated that President Xi Jinping and other Chinese officials were his friends. He also publicly declared that the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG), a northeastern section of the Spratly Islands, was already in physical control and possession of Beijing due to the unchallenged presence of its military and maritime militia vessels there. Given these statements, Duterte has constantly received criticism over his defeatist stance towards China.

After Duterte acted to abrogate the VFA in February 2020, the US Embassy in Manila received formal notice four months later. However, the Philippine government made three consecutive requests for a six-month suspension of the termination. Duterte finally recalled the notice following his July 2021 meeting with US **Defense Secretary** Lloyd Austin III.

While Duterte's attempt to end the security arrangement is already a part of contemporary history, its significance should not be dismissed. It is an important event to understand for posterity, as a reference for the alliance, and in light of China's aggressive activities that challenge not only Philippine territorial security but also the stability of the South China Sea.

The VFA, signed in 1998, must be seen in the context of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allocates \$70 million to developing Philippine military sites for use by US rotating forces and the storage of their equipment. The EDCA operationalizes the MDT by ensuring the regular presence of US forces and their assets in the Philippines and guaranteeing their operational readiness for security contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region. The VFA serves as the "procedural basis" for bringing American troops into the Philippines, even on temporary visits. While the US-Philippine Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) was signed with the Philippines in 2002, this would only give the United States limited rights to base equipment in the country for a limited period.

In 1992, after the US military closed its Philippine bases in Subic Bay and Clark, the VFA restored the continuous, albeit more modest, presence of US troops in the Philippines. Thomas Hubbard, the former US Ambassador who spearheaded the VFA, noted that without the VFA, "We had a treaty [MDT], but we have no way of exercising, no procedures for basing or rotating of forces into the Philippines." The US military presence the VFA brings to the Philippines also stabilizes the West Philippine Sea (WPS). According to Hubbard, US forces in the region could have deterred Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea had the Philippine Senate not ended US basing rights in 1991. Thus, while extricating the Chinese from the KIG is unlikely in the near term, the VFA still gives the Philippines and the United States the leverage to monitor, and even deter, future territorial encroachment.

Similarly, nixing the VFA will encourage China to sustain its aggressive activities and intrude deeper into the Philippine maritime waters, as shown by the presence of at least 230 Chinese naval vessels in Whitsun Reef in December 2020. These vessels dispersed after Manila lodged a formal protest with the Chinese Embassy. However, they reappeared in greater numbers in different areas of the KIG and WPS. Some also returned to the Whitsun Reef months later, as confirmed by the then Philippine National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. The sightings of Chinese ships in the reef amount to a regular Chinese presence in the WPS and KIG. Despite Duterte's friendly stance with China, Beijing has not slowed down on its territorial transgressions. The Philippine government filed 388 diplomatic protests against China during Duterte's term.

Had the VFA been scuttled, it would disallow the US occupation of sites within the Philippines threatened by Chinese development plans. Instead, the absence of American troops in those locations would make it easier for Beijing to pursue its grand plan for Scarborough Shoal and violate Philippine waters farther to the North under its nine-dash line claims, which was rejected by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016.

Without the VFA, the United States will not be able to defend the Philippines, and it will not be able to pursue and continue its activities under the EDCA. In its present form, the security agreement serves as a deterrent against Beijing. While US obligations to defend the Philippines exist under the MDT, even without the VFA, America will not be able to do so without the presence of its troops in the country. The nearest American bases are in Japan and Guam. As such, without the VFA, America will lose its ability to defend the Philippines. Faced with that reality, US leadership may consider the abolition of the MDT.

The abrogation of the MDT will damage the international credibility and reputation of the Philippines. It will also reflect poorly on the US. The termination of the VFA will sour the political, economic, diplomatic, and military dimensions of US-Philippines relations. Additionally, it will deny the Armed Forces of the Philippines a major source of assistance for training, modernization, and equipment.

Even under Duterte, the United States provided the Philippines with \$267.75 million in military financing and defense equipment from 2016 to 2019. Foreign military financing totaled another \$45 million from 2020 to 2021. US aid also included \$200 million for aircraft, training, equipment, and construction for the Philippine military. Despite lukewarm relations, the countries still implemented scaled-down bilateral exercises. These activities allowed Filipino soldiers to enhance their modern war-fighting skills and interoperability with US forces.

Under Marcos, US assistance and Bilateral cooperation are expected to increase. For example, both countries have already agreed to raise annual joint military drills from 300, the 2020 total, to at least 500. During her November 2022 visit to the Philippines, US Vice President Kamala Harris announced several initiatives with the Philippines and additional funding for the Philippine Coast Guard. Recently, the two countries agreed to [expand the EDCA](#), allowing US troops to operate out of four additional bases.

More broadly, the VFA will give America a forward presence in Southeast Asia and maintain the region's equilibrium by checking China's regional hegemonic ambitions and efforts to dominate the South China Sea. Troops stationed in the Philippines also give the United States the speed and agility needed to respond quickly should China attack Taiwan, which is just north of the Philippines across the Bashi Channel.

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