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The ‘United States Factor’ in Southeast Asia: The Philippine and Singaporean (Re)assessments

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Despite reports on the unpredictability of Washington’s Asia policy, the Trump Administration, through telephone diplomacy, high-level bilateral visits, attendance at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), East Asian Summit (EAS) and bilateral meetings in Vietnam and the Philippines, has displayed a “post-pivot” US commitment to the region and its multilateral initiatives. Despite this, its engagement framed by collective action on North Korea, and a lack of specific concrete regional cooperatives, plays into Southeast Asia’s long-term anxiety. This anxiety is addressed by Southeast Asian leaders recalibrating their external engagements, including relations with the United States, in their strategic pursuit of policy maneuverability, autonomy, and prosperity. The cases of the Philippines and Singapore highlight how regional countries are coping with “The United States Factor”.

Ithrana Lawrence, Former Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Although recognized as a major non-NATO US ally since 2003, the Philippines increasingly views China as an important and economically attractive source of support.”

The Philippines’ Realignment under President Rodrigo Duterte

Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines’ perception of the US role in the region has changed. Although recognized as a major non-NATO US ally since 2003, the Philippines increasingly views China as an important and economically attractive source of support, and Manila has shown an increasing willingness to accommodate Beijing’s assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS). Despite a 66 year-old alliance, the Philippines is diverging from the United States on issues of security and governance.

Duterte’s announced “separation” from the United States and refusal to visit Washington despite Trump’s invitation are efforts to chart an independent foreign policy. Distance from the U.S. is a price President Duterte seems eager to pay. Although the Obama-Aquino administrations’ Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allowing US military forces and weapons to be stationed in the Philippines was ruled constitutional and has not been abrogated, Manila is wary of implementation. For example, the Philippine Defense Secretary remarked it was “unlikely” that the United States would be allowed to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) from the Philippines “to avoid any provocative actions that can escalate tensions” as the “US can fly over there coming from other bases.” Similarly, Duterte downplayed US assistance in Marawi despite the US Embassy in Manila reporting a donation of planes, weapons, technical assistance, and humanitarian aid worth \$56 million in 2017 – recognizing instead the contributions of China and Russia on the same day Secretary of Defense Mattis arrived in Manila.

Doubts about US commitment of the United States to defend the Philippines in the event of a conflict with China in the South China Sea have driven President Duterte to chart an engagement strategy avoiding overreliance on Washington. China’s symbolic \$14.4 million arms package was delivered as the US Congress disapproved a sale of assault rifles for the Philippine National Police (PNP) due to concerns of state sanctioned human rights violations in the ‘war on drugs’. The Philippines has leveraged competition in the region, securing Beijing’s pledge of \$24 billion in infrastructure (including free infrastructure) projects in Davao and Manila, and \$22.7 million in Marawi; alongside Tokyo’s \$8.8 billion “maximum support” to rebuild Marawi.

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Duterte's Philippines has shown selective accommodation to China's assertiveness as it recognizes the opportunities of engaging a rising China. Recent examples include the removal of a hut on a sandbar upon Beijing's protest, not openly protesting territorial incursions, and allowing Chinese ships to survey within Philippine territory. That being said, the Philippines remains committed to its territorial sovereignty, with the Philippine Navy deployed to guard current claims.

The Trump administration's generally absent rhetoric on human rights, and praise for the war on drugs has improved bilateral leadership camaraderie. All anti-US outbursts over the year aside, President Duterte's 'karaoke diplomacy' at the ASEAN Summit gala dinner signals an affinity for the commander in chief of the United States.

Singapore's Longstanding Alignment

Despite China's growing economic significance, political assertiveness, and security provocations in the SCS, Singapore's alignment responses have been different than those of the Philippines. Singapore is partnering closer with Washington than with Beijing on most issues, and the United States is still viewed as an indispensable partner, significant to the development and security of the island state. While Singapore boasts a high degree of military technology, interoperability, and physical infrastructure to host the U.S. Pacific Fleet's logistics command, its refusal to be recognized as a major non-NATO US ally reflects the island-state's maintenance of a public non-aligned strategic engagement.

Although China is the island-state's top trading partner, the United States remains its largest foreign investor with stock totaling \$228 billion and an annual bilateral trade surplus. Singapore's open support of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's July 2016 ruling and non-claimant concern over freedom of navigation in its regional waters faced high-cost pressure from Beijing: seizure of military equipment in Hong Kong en-route from exercises in Taiwan, cancellation of the 2016 high level Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) and apparent non-invitation of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Although showing resolve to face China's growing pressure, a subsequent delegation of high-level officials to Beijing followed by Prime Minister Lee's own visit is symbolic of Beijing's growing significance as a partner not to be openly defied. Singapore looks to harness China's economic engagement with the region specifically as a global financial services hub for the Belt and Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Singapore remains a strong advocate for US engagement in the region, with a pledge to facilitate initiatives for regional counter-terrorism efforts upon assuming ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018. Bilaterally, Prime Minister Lee's pledge to extend to 2018 his country's support for the anti-IS coalition in the Middle East (the only Asian country to contribute personnel) and deployment of helicopters to hurricane relief efforts in Texas are symbolic of Singapore's activism and the leadership's institutionalized affinity for the United States. The progressive deepening of defense cooperatives also witnessed the first bilateral naval exercise taking place off the coast of Guam, following the deployment of the Singapore Air Force (RSAF) there for joint training in April.

The Philippine and Singaporean alignments demonstrate models that can be expanded to other Southeast Asian countries. There are signs countries like Indonesia and Malaysia are reassessing the traditional role of the United States and to a certain extent adjusting their external engagements as the systemic conditions that placed the United States as the key security protector, economic patron, and diplomatic partner at the end of the Cold War are changing. Future research on asymmetrical alignment under uncertainty should examine these states.

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