

Philippine Defense Cooperation with Russia: A Wake-up Call for the United States?

By Anna Patricia L. Saberon

Since the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, the Philippines has pursued an independent foreign policy aimed at gaining distance from the United States. President Duterte has called upon China and Russia for assistance in the modernization of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), much to the dislike of Washington. It must not be forgotten that the Philippines and the United States have a long-standing military alliance, established in various agreements: the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), Military Assistance Agreement, Visiting Forces Agreement, Cooperative Threat Reduction Agreement, and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, to name a few. Despite these US-Philippines agreements, and the perceived warm connection between President Duterte and US President Donald Trump, the Philippines is undeniably turning to its northern neighbors for defense cooperation.

Anna Saberon,
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explains that “The
new defense
cooperation
between the
Philippines and
Russia represents a
wake-up call for the
United States.”

In May 2017, President Duterte went to Russia for an official visit and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Later in October, the Philippines signed an agreement with Russia on Defense and Technical Cooperation. The document contained provisions on various areas of military and technical cooperation such as research, production support, as well as possible exchange of experts and training of personnel for joint programs. Manila and Moscow also signed a contract for the Philippines’ procurement of defense articles from Rosoboronexport, a Russian state-owned company. Additionally, Russia supplied small arms and army trucks to the Philippines.

Presidents Duterte and Putin also met at the sidelines of the APEC Summit held in Vietnam in November 2017. The two leaders discussed possible cooperation on military and economic concerns including Russian counter-terrorism training for Filipino soldiers, construction of a ship repair facility for Russian vessels passing through the Philippines, and the Russian donation of weapons in Marawi City.

It seems that things are going well between the two governments as evidenced by the increased number of visits by high-level officials. In September, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana visited Russia and inspected various military equipment showcased in the International Military-Technical Forum ARMY 2018 show in Moscow.

In the words of Philippine Ambassador to Russia Carlos Sorreta, “Russia is willing to provide brand new equipment customized to the specific needs of the Philippines, at favorable financial terms, with reasonable delivery times, full after sales service, necessary training and without political conditionalities or limitations.” The Philippines is in dire need of modern military equipment and has been struggling to procure new equipment for many years now. Russia’s recognition of the Philippines’ military needs, including battle plans and tactics, allows the AFP to maximize their use.

Amidst these new developments, we hear US officials voicing statements that the Philippines' military purchase deals with Russia will not be helpful to the US-Philippines alliance. According to US Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver, "choosing another supplier like Russia will be an opportunity cost that will affect interoperability." He added that the United States can be a better partner than the Russians can be to the Philippines. To summarize his sentiments, the Philippines ultimately will not benefit from greater defense ties with Russia.

President Duterte subsequently revealed that he received a letter from three top US officials: Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The letter insists on the significance of Philippine procurement of US military equipment, "exemplifying our continuing commitment to the breadth and the strength of our alliance."

Perhaps without publicly admitting it, the US leadership is bothered by how the Philippines is no longer a 'follower' of US foreign policy. For decades, the Philippines sourced military equipment from the United States and now the Duterte Administration has been turning away from Washington. This is largely because previous sales from the United States were of used arms and equipment and following certain conditionalities that frustrated many Philippine authorities including military personnel.

In the new US National Security Strategy, mention was made that "in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Thailand remain important allies and markets for Americans." The Trump Administration is pushing for the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, with the aim of including India in regional cooperation and a larger leadership role of Japan. It is important to mention here that Diego Garcia, an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, has been operating as a military base with American and British forces since the 1970s.

Analyzing the statements and policies of US officials over the years, one comes to the conclusion that the United States wants to be the major, if not the sole, supplier of military equipment to the Philippines. The Philippines became a receiver of used/decommissioned equipment from the United States (e.g. BRP Gregorio del Pilar, BRP Ramon Alcaraz and BRP Andres Bonifacio – all naval vessels currently under the roster of the Philippine Navy). This equipment was made available as an Excess Defense Article under the US Defense Department's Defense Security Cooperation Agency. While the United States has its own reasons for doing so, the outcome is Philippine military dependence on the United States. Instead of actually contributing to the strength and modernization of the Philippine military, Washington had a role in the decades-long weakness of the AFP. That is not to say that the Philippines is blameless for its own neglect of defense modernization, but the Philippine-US alliance is supposed to help strengthen the AFP, not weaken it. While previous Philippine Presidents were complacent and were hesitant to display defiance against the United States, President Duterte is not. He stands firm in his belief that the United States failed to give the Philippines what it needed and consequently he has deepened defense relations with Russia.

The new defense cooperation between the Philippines and Russia represents a wake-up call for the United States. No longer the 'little brother' of the US, no longer dependent on US foreign policy decisions, no longer pleased with leftovers, spare/used equipment from the United States, and no longer naïve; the Philippines is out to pursue an independent foreign policy. Washington should bear in mind that neglecting the Philippines has repercussions. If indeed it is true that the United States is a strong ally of the Philippines, then it seems that a few mistakes have been made: a) refusing to give priority to the Philippines and b) failure in preparation as they did not anticipate that the Philippines would turn to its neighbors, in particular China and Russia.

For the Philippines, the future is not with the United States alone, but with multiple partner countries — most notably its neighbors. The Philippines-Russia defense cooperation will bring to the Philippines modernized military equipment, military training, and the pronounced assurance that defense partners make each other stronger.

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