

The Philippine-US Alliance in 2019

By Julio Amador

At the end of 2018, two developments rocked the alliance between the Philippines and the United States. Delfin Lorenzana, the Philippine secretary of national defense, called for the review of the Mutual Defense Treaty. In the United States, Secretary James Mattis resigned out of principle, to be temporarily replaced by his relatively inexperienced deputy. With US-China competition moving into high gear, coupled with the unstable domestic politics of the two allied countries, a review of the mutual defense treaty will pose a great challenge to alliance management.

Julio Amador, former Fulbright ASEAN Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Despite being a former colony, commonwealth, and current ally of the United States, the Philippines has not received any concrete assurances from Washington on its territorial claims in the South China Sea.”

Lorenzana publicly stated the fears and worries held by a large portion of the policymaking sector in the Philippines: that the United States will not defend its ally in the event of an attack in Philippine-claimed areas in the South China Sea, particularly the Kalayaan Island Group. Despite being a former colony, commonwealth, and current ally of the United States, the Philippines has not received any concrete assurances from Washington on its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and it does not see the freedom of navigation operations of FONOPS as a serious strategy in deterring Chinese ambitions for regional primacy.

Currently, Under the Mutual Defense Treaty, the allies will act to meet the common danger if either party suffers an armed attack on a) its metropolitan territory, b) the island territories under its jurisdiction in the Pacific area, and c) its armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the Pacific area. However, it is not clear if the South China Sea is included in the ‘Pacific area’ under the Treaty, or if the disputed islands in the South China Sea are considered island territories of the Philippines. To be fair to US policymakers, this ambiguity allows them to stay clear of any potential adventurism on the part of allies, hence avoiding entanglement in disputes or even war where its interests are seen to be limited.

Despite these fundamental issues at play in the alliance, if 2018 is an indication, the Philippines-US alliance in 2019 will not be without its successes and high-points too. The high-point is the return of the bells of Balangiga, which has been positively received in the Philippines, and is a big indication of the ability of the United States to concede on non-strategic issues. Earlier in 2018, Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea led a high-level delegation to Hawaii for a meeting with the then-named Pacific Command to discuss critical bilateral and regional developments.

In the Philippine campaign against terrorism, the United States is the Philippines' leading partner, providing at least \$70 million in assistance in the form of "drones, rubber boats, pistols, grenade launchers and surveillance aircraft". In 2019, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) will also be receiving 4 OV-10B planes from the US. The allied countries will also engage in 281 security cooperation activities in 2019.

The alliance management between the two sides can be considered effective as they have been able to maintain strong military ties despite the political noise coming from elected officials. Adroit diplomacy and strong military-to-military ties allow both sides to make the most out of a difficult political environment. To date, the United States has been among the strongest supporters of the Philippines in rebuilding conflict-torn Marawi, and in improving the capability of the AFP, and there is no clear indication that the Philippines has moved away from the US sphere of influence.

What is lacking in the alliance is overall strategic direction. While the United States is pursuing its strategy of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific and building the Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, and India), the Philippines remains agnostic on the issue. To date, the response from the Philippines has been muted. The Philippines, however, has good strategic relations with both Japan and Australia, alongside its alliance with the United States. Moreover, the Philippines is as President Trump called it, a 'prime' piece of real estate, a fact not lost to serious strategic thinkers in all three countries. The Philippines, however, has been slow in capitalizing on this, and its handling of relations with the United States has always focused on the emotional side. Lorenzana's demand for a review of the mutual defense treaty should be a call for the Philippines to seriously consider its overall strategic relations with Washington.

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A review of the Mutual Defense Treaty should be premised on cautious soul-searching on the part of the Philippines. Rather than fixate on the treaty, the two sides must carefully assess the overall state of the alliance. On the strategic side, the United States and the Philippines should deeply consider whether their overall strategies still align. Among others, the Philippines needs to consider whether it has a place in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific that the United States is advocating for and what its role will be.

The 2+2 or regular meeting of the Foreign Affairs/State Department and DND/DOD should be revived to manage the alliance. The Bilateral Strategic Dialogues (BSD) should also be maintained as this mechanism allows for in-depth discussion of a "full range of political, security, and economic cooperation between the United States and the Philippines." The last BSD was hosted by the United States on December 2017 and the Philippines was supposed to host the 2018 meeting, but the meeting never occurred.

The return of the Balangiga Bells shows that the allies are able to work together to resolve a long-standing issues. Both sides must find the wisdom to see whether an alliance that succeeded a colonial relationship, post-World War II will still work in the evolving strategic environment.

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