



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 297 | December 18, 2014

Eyes on the Prize? The Philippines-US Alliance and Defense Modernization

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Julio S. Amador III, Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Service Institute of the Philippines, explains that “The Philippines must not lose sight of the fact that the goal is to achieve credible defense and a sustainable modern military at par with its regional neighbors in ASEAN.”

The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the United States of America and the Republic of the Philippines is under challenge in the Philippines’ Supreme Court on constitutional grounds. Petitioners against the EDCA argue that the agreement violates the Philippines’ prohibition against foreign bases unless the Senate concurs with the agreement. The government’s reply is that the EDCA is an executive agreement, not a treaty, and thus, there is no need for the Senate’s concurrence. Beyond the legal context, the strategic and policy considerations loom large in the Supreme Court hearings.

The EDCA, signed on April 2014 by National Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin for the Philippines, and Ambassador Philip Goldberg for the US, revitalizes the Philippine-US bilateral security alliance to help the Philippines attain a minimum credible defense posture to respond to regional and global security challenges. The agreement implements the need to develop the Philippines and the US’ defense capabilities in the Asia Pacific region as agreed upon in the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). The EDCA permits and regulates the access and use of some facilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) by the US military. This allows both sides to undertake high-impact and high-value security cooperation exercises, joint and combined training activities that promote interoperability, and capacity building. The experience of the Philippines with the destructive typhoon, Haiyan, also showed the importance of having immediate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) capabilities, which the US was able to provide.

Opponents of EDCA argue that the EDCA violates the Philippines’ territorial integrity and sovereignty. Critics also claim the agreement is one-sided because it advances only the US’ interests. An important angle raised in the Supreme Court hearings is the strategic concerns in the West Philippine Sea, particularly the maritime disputes involving the Philippines and China. The Supreme Court hearings brought out the continuing inadequacy of the AFP to provide minimum credible defense in light of the challenges in an uncertain regional strategic environment.

While the legal questions are very important, particularly because they touch on sensitive issues for a lot of Filipinos, the problem of defense modernization and credibility is going to be a continuing problem that needs to be addressed.

Under President Benigno S. Aquino III, the Philippines has been seriously engaging in defense modernization. The first phase of this was to re-orient the AFP from focusing on internal security to concentrating on external security. Under the US security umbrella, which was in place since the colonial period, and strengthened during the Cold War, the

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Philippines chose to tackle internal security issues, such as responding to a continuing communist insurgency and confronting secessionist issues in the Southern Philippines. Now, driven by an uncertain regional strategic environment, the government has devoted resources to a much-needed modernization. The AFP instituted the Long-Term Capability Development Program which saw the acquisition of multi-purpose attack vessels, naval helicopters, patrol aircraft and frigates. From the US, the Philippines purchased two decommissioned Hamilton-class cutters, the BRP Gregorio Del Pilar and the BRP Ramon Alcaraz. From South Korea, the Philippines acquired 12 TA-50 Golden Eagle light attack aircraft built by Korea Aerospace Industries. The Philippines is also looking at Italy as a source of military assets and there are plans to procure three AW-109 naval helicopters and two Mistral frigates. The Philippines’ defense budget, which had been set at US\$1.9 billion since 2002, rose to US\$2.5 billion in 2012.

In the 2015 budget of the AFP, several key assets were included for procurement: lead-in fighter trainer jet ammunition, long-range patrol aircraft, multi-purpose attack craft, rocket launchers, and base upgrades. The AFP was given a budget of around US\$553 million for these defense projects. As of September 2014, 37 military upgrade projects costing US\$206 million were completed. Other projects are due for completion by the end of 2015.

With these developments, the Philippines is on a path of slow but deliberate defense modernization. Institutional challenges will continue to hamper the process. Corruption in the military is still a concern but there are strong efforts to address it. Defense spending is also low and not on par with its regional neighbors. The ASEAN average for defense spending is around 3 percent of GDP while the Philippines spends only about 1 percent. An important reason for this is the constitutionally mandated proviso that defense spending should not exceed expenditures on the education sector.

The Philippines-US alliance is going to be necessary for the foreseeable future even as defense modernization is being undertaken. Only Filipinos will, in the end, be willing to defend the country’s borders and its territories. Nevertheless, the long and shared history of the two countries indicates the desire to continue working as allies in an ever-changing regional order.

The Philippines must not lose sight of the fact that the goal is to achieve credible defense and a sustainable modern military at par with its regional neighbors in ASEAN. The Philippines cannot afford to completely rely on the American security umbrella, which is continuously being rained upon by the Chinese, who seem determined to change the regional security order. Self-help remains the name of the game in international security, but assistance from allies and other partners should not be rejected, but used judiciously while defense modernization is underway. Hypothetical questions such as whether the US will come to the defense of the Philippines if the latter is attacked by an external party may make for good conversation but they miss out on the real objective: a strong, capable, and modern AFP that can exert a defensive shield over the Philippines’ maritime boundaries and territories.

Whether the EDCA is rendered unconstitutional or whether other agreements in the future may face rough sailing in the political and legal contexts of the Philippines, the fact of the matter is that the Philippines will still need to attain minimum defense credibility and build its external security capability. The Philippines-US alliance, through the MDT, the VFA, and the EDCA as an implementing agreement, is only a means to that necessary end.

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The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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