

The Philippines’ foreign policy and relations towards major powers

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Introduction

“The Philippines is a friend to all countries and enemy to none,” is the overarching foreign policy of the country according to Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario¹. In a statement released to the Philippines’ media, Del Rosario further remarked that the country pursues “an independent foreign policy which protects our national sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as promotes the national interest and our right to self-determination.”²

The statement embodies the way foreign relations have been carried out by the administration of President Benigno S. Aquino III. Nevertheless, it is

¹ Albert del Rosario. “A principled Philippine foreign policy.” *Rappler*, 16 August 2012, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/10625-a-principled-philippine-foreign-policy> (accessed May 28, 2015).

² Del Rosario, 2012.

reflective of the country's overall diplomatic approach. Being a developing country and in strategic terms, a generally small power, the Philippines has to maintain cordial if not amicable relations with great powers.

This essay seeks to provide an overview and analysis of the Philippines' foreign relations with selected major and middle powers. The first part examines Philippine foreign policy (1.) while the remaining parts of the paper provide overviews and observations on the country's relations with the United States of America, Japan, China, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (2-6).



1. Philippine Foreign Policy

In his National Security Policy, Aquino acknowledged the complexity of the security challenges faced by the Philippines, noting that these "challenges and concerns are intertwined locally, regionally and globally and that they are always interconnected with the risks and opportunities within and outside our national boundaries."³ These security challenges need to be faced in cooperation with major and middle powers, and as Del Rosario has stressed, the Philippines seeks to improve its ties with these countries to protect its interests.

The Philippines's approach to international relations and foreign policy is enshrined in its Constitution. Specifically, the overall approach is found in Section 2, Article II, which states that,

The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation, and amity with all nations.

The approach then to relations with other states and the international system is one that puts premium on international law, non-aggression, and cooperation. As explained by Del Rosario, the Philippines wants an international system that "will be just and fair to all states regardless of size and relative power," and that the aspiration is "for a multi-polar world where states act responsibly."⁴ **The Philippines' approach to foreign policy is liberal as it sees international law as a key element in regulating the behavior of states;** further, the Philippines wants an international order that is just and rules-based and its foreign policy therefore seeks to promote international institutions as a means to resolve disagreements between and among states.⁵

3 Republic of the Philippines. *National Security Policy 2011-2016: Securing the Gains of Democracy*. Official Document, Quezon City: National Security Council, 2011.

4 Del Rosario, 2012.

5 Albert Del Rosario. "An Independent and Principled Philippine Foreign Policy for Economic Growth," Department of Foreign Affairs, 24 October 2013, <http://www.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-06-27-21-50-36/dfa-releases/1110-an-independent-and-principled-philippine-foreign-policy-for-economic-growth> (accessed on 30 July 2015).

Nevertheless, Philippine governments are required by the same constitution (section 7, Article II), **to pursue an independent foreign policy** that has as its paramount considerations national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination. Philippine relations with other states and the country's foreign policy in general seek to advance the national interest. This is not necessarily in contradiction with a liberal approach to the international system. As a small power, the Philippines' interests can only be advanced in an arena that is free from coercion by military means. Multilateral processes allow for fairer dialogue and even compromise but these processes are the best means to advance its own interests in the international system. Being weak or small does not necessarily make a state helpless. Indeed, **under the logic of realism, states need to provide security for themselves under the self-help system of international politics;** although of course, there is no guarantee that it can be achieved⁶. While weak states may not have the luxury of making grand strategies because they do not have sufficient power in the first place⁷, it does not mean that they cannot try to map out a coherent response to the evolving security and economic conditions in which they must need to survive.

As the following bilateral and multilateral relations will show, **the Philippines has ideological and pragmatic approaches to foreign affairs**. These are not necessarily contradictory, they are part and parcel of a foreign policy of a small power in a world that is becoming more strategically challenging and complex.



2. Philippines-United States: Towards an Enduring Alliance

The Philippines and the United States have a long, complex, and constantly evolving relationship. Despite several ebbs and flows over the years, the United States arguably remains as the Philippines' most important bilateral partner. The relationship has been solidified not only by the two countries' longstanding alliance under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, but also by their shared historical experiences, common democratic values and principles, and robust socio-cultural and people-to-people linkages.

Recent developments in the security environment in the past decade – particularly the rise of China as a regional power and the intensification of territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea – have provided **renewed**

6 Stephen M. Walt, «The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition.» In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, edited by Ira Katznelson and Helen V Milner, 197-230. New York: WW Norton & Company, 2002. See also Brian C. Schmidt, «The primacy of national security.» Chap. 9 in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, edited by Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne, 155-170. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

7 Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times." *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 57-68.

impetus for the Philippines-US relationship. On the part of the Philippines, its military weakness in the face of perceived aggressive stance by China in the South China Sea has prompted it to work more closely with allies not only in providing deterrence but also in providing assistance as it modernizes its own armed forces. While for the US, it has embarked on a 'rebalancing to Asia' program by revitalizing alliances, expanding naval deployments, and deepening diplomatic and economic relationships with traditional allies and new partners alike. While the US government declares that the objective of the 'rebalance' is to contribute to the stability, prosperity, and the security and normative dynamics in the Asia-Pacific, many scholars view that the program has been driven by a concern about China's ascent and its potential to displace the US as the preeminent power in the region.

The complementarity of security interests has facilitated greater cooperation between the Philippines and the US. The two countries started in **2011** their Bilateral Strategic Dialogue to consult and exchange views on a variety of bilateral, regional and global issues – from counter-terrorism to maritime security and maritime domain awareness, from disaster risk management, to rapid response. There has also been an increase in exchanges of high-level visits among officials of the two countries; as highlighted by the first Two plus Two Meeting in **2012** between their respective foreign affairs and defense secretaries, and the visit of US President Barack Obama in Manila on 28-29 April 2014.

Also during Obama's visit, the two countries signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (**EDCA**) which would allow greater US access to Philippine military facilities, rotational deployment of US forces, and increased cooperation in areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and maritime domain awareness. The EDCA is also hoped to assist and complement the armed forces modernization being undertaken by the Philippine government. In the past few years, the Philippines acquired from the US naval vessels such as the two Hamilton-class cutters BRP *Gregorio del Pilar* and BRP *Ramon Alcaraz*, 23 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMV) ambulances for the Philippine Army, and two C-130 aircraft for the Philippine Air Force. While the EDCA, as of this writing, is still being examined by the Philippine Supreme Court on the issue of constitutionality, it already represents the commitment of the two countries to update and strengthen the alliance in response to new and emerging threats and challenges.

The enhanced defense relationship between the Philippines and the US is not unique as several Southeast Asian countries are also seeking increased cooperation with the US in response to the shifting geopolitical environment in the region. Vietnam and the US for instance have dramatically ramped up their defense relations through the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relationship in June 2015, while Singapore has welcomed the rotational deployment of littoral combat ships of the US Navy Pacific Fleet. These efforts by smaller Southeast Asian states are viewed as their way of mitigating strategic uncertainties that arise from the asymmetrical power relationship with neighboring China.

The ongoing tensions in the South China Sea also provide common ground for Philippines-US relations. While the US maintains its neutrality on the individual claims of parties, it opposes coercive actions that would threaten regional stability and hinder freedom of navigation, which is considered as a vital national interest. Thus not only has the US openly criticized unilateral actions in the area, such as land reclamation by China, **it has also been among the most vocal supporters of the Philippines' approach towards a rules-based order** and the application of international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in resolving the maritime disputes.

Despite the current upswing, there have also been **hindrances and challenges in the current Philippine-US relations.** First is the domestic debate within the Philippines on issues of EDCA foreign basing (which is prohibited under the Philippine Constitution), criminal jurisdiction of US servicemen (i.e. the case of Jennifer Laude) and environmental protection (i.e. the grounding of the USS *Guardian* in the Tubbataha Reef in 2013). The second issue is the perceived ambiguity of US defense commitments to the Philippines. While the US government has reiterated the 'ironclad'⁸ and enduring nature of the alliance, some observe that the assurances made by the US to the Philippines are not as clear cut as those are given to Japan, in which the US has categorically stated in several occasions that the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands are covered by the Japan-US Security Treaty. Thus, there are some concerns as to what can the Philippines expect from the US in the event that conflict erupts in the region.

Nonetheless, **Philippines-US relations appear as robust as ever.** Rather than a relationship of asymmetry and complete dependency, Philippines-US relations can be seen as facilitated by the convergence of interests and the commonalities in views about the threats and challenges that the region faces today.

3. Philippines-Japan: Forward Looking and Strategic Partnership

Seventy years since the end of the Second World War and six decades since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1956, Philippines-Japan relations have dramatically evolved to span economic, cultural, political, and increasingly, the defense and security realms. Japan continues to be **the Philippines' top trading partner**, with the Philippines-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (PJEPA) serving as the foundation of the economic relations. Japan is also a leading source of foreign investment and official development assistance (ODA) in important sectors of infrastructure, agriculture, power and energy, and disaster

⁸ Mark Felsenthal and Matt Spetalnick, "Obama says US commitment to defend Philippines 'ironclad'," *Reuters*, 29 April 2014.

risk reduction⁹. Japanese tourists are among the top visitors to the Philippines, while the number of Filipino tourists in Japan has also been steadily increasing due to the growth in the Philippine economy and the easing of travel requirements set by the Japanese government.

However, **an area where the bilateral relationship has been noticeably improving is in security and defense.** Japan and the Philippines are strategic partners. While the partnership encompasses cooperation in a wide range of issues¹⁰, cooperation in maritime security and maritime domain awareness has recently become a focus. This is in light of the developments in the region, particularly their shared concern about China's actions and intentions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Japan is embroiled in a dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. While not a claimant in the South China, Japan also closely monitors the developments in the area given its reliance on the vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for trade and commerce. Thus, Japan emphasizes the need to maintain the openness and stability of the seas and has articulated its support for the Philippines' efforts towards a rules-based approach in the South China Sea.¹¹

The state visit of President Benigno Aquino III to Japan and his summit meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2-5 June 2015 provided another opportunity for the two countries to further enhance their strategic partnership. In their joint declaration, the two leaders highlighted possible collaboration between their countries in defense equipment and technology. This is in addition to the 10 patrol vessels that the Philippines is set to procure through a soft loan from the Japanese government¹². These vessels are expected to assist the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) in enhancing its capability to monitor the maritime borders of the country. But more importantly, the two countries are also exploring the possibility of concluding a Visiting Forces Agreement which would allow the participation and access of Japan Self-Defense Forces to Philippine military facilities in areas that are of common interest such as disaster relief activities.

The growing security relationship between the Philippines and Japan reflects a broader trend of closer cooperation between and among US allies in the region. The US alliance system has traditionally been described as 'hub-and-spokes' in which the US is at the center or at the 'hub' while its allies are the 'spokes' which have limited degree defense cooperation among

them. But in recent years, **a number of bilateral and mini-lateral arrangements have emerged in the area of defense cooperation.** For instance, the Philippines and South Korea have entered into agreements on military training, information sharing, and sale of military hardware. Meanwhile, Japan, for the first time, has participated in a US-Australia military exercise, thus signaling a stronger US-Japan-Australia defense cooperation.¹³

The increased cooperation among US allies in the region are prompted by growing uncertainties in the security environment as well as the doubts about the US' ability to carry out its defense commitments due to budgetary constraints and perceived relative decline vis-à-vis China. The US, however, has welcomed such developments and has even encouraged its allies to work together and take up more burden in maintaining regional peace and stability. While on the part of a small country like the Philippines, working closely with Japan allows it to broaden its network with likeminded states and diversify defense relations.

While some Asian countries have expressed concerns about the Japanese government's efforts to become a 'normal power' given to the legacies of the Second World War, the Philippines has actively welcomed and **supported Japan's domestic reforms in its security sector.** Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario said in an interview that the Philippines welcomes Japan as a "significant balancing factor" in the face of a militarily assertive China¹⁴. During the summit with Prime Minister Abe, President Aquino stated that the Philippines "does not view with any concern" Japan's reinterpretation of its Constitution particularly on the matters of defense¹⁵. Even though the Philippines also suffered from Japanese occupation during the Second World War, it no longer appears to be that of a dominant issue or key hindrance in the deepening of their bilateral relations. The long history of economic cooperation, people-to-people linkages, and shared democratic values may have softened any lingering resentment about Japan's wartime past. Furthermore, it is the convergence of perception of threats, challenges and opportunities that has allowed the Philippines to pursue a forward-looking and comprehensive relationship with Japan.

9 "Yen Loan Projects In Luzon," *Embassy of Japan in the Philippines*, 2012, <http://www.ph.emb-japan.go.jp/bilateral/image/oda%202010%20update/map%20oda.htm> (accessed in August 2015).

10 "Japan-Philippines Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Promotion of the "Strategic Partnership" between Neighboring Countries Connected by Special Bonds of Friendship," 27 September 2011, http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/noda/joint_statement110927.html

11 "Japan-Philippines Joint Declaration: A Strengthened Strategic Partnership for Advancing the Shared Principles and Goals of Peace, Security, and Growth in the Region and Beyond," 4 June 2015, Tokyo, Japan.

12 TokoSekiguchi, "Japan to Provide Patrol Vessels to Philippines," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/japan-to-provide-patrol-vessels-to-philippines-1433424771 (accessed 29 June 2015).

13 Matt Siegel, "Japan to joint U.S., Australia war games amid growing China tensions," *Reuters*, 26 May 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/26/us-australia-usa-japan-idUSKB-N00A1GE20150526> (accessed 29 June 2015).

14 David Pilling, Roel Landingin, and Jonathan Soble, "Philippines backs rearming of Japan," *The Financial Times*, 9 December 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/250430bc-41ba-11e2-a8c3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3fkqSHw4Z> (accessed 12 July 2015).

15 Speech of President Aquino during a meeting with the Japan National Press Club, *Official Gazette*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.gov.ph/2015/06/05/speech-of-president-aquino-during-a-meeting-with-the-japan-national-press-club/> (accessed 12 July 2015).

4. Philippines-China relations

Managing the Philippine-China bilateral ties is considered as one of the most crucial and most challenging in the conduct of Philippine foreign policy¹⁶. Since the opening of diplomatic relations on June 9, 1975, the relations have seen its highs and lows but most of the time, have often been characterized by sustained robust cooperation efforts from both sides and open communication lines. However, scholars and observers alike are noting that in the last five years, under President Benigno Aquino III's administration, **the bilateral relations are taking a turn, deteriorating even, with some describing the current state in its lowest point**. This is in stark contrast to the state of bilateral relations during the Macapagal-Arroyo administration that was more receptive to Beijing¹⁷. This low point in the bilateral relations can be traced to one major irritant – the tensions over disputed territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea (West Philippine Sea). As a result, tensions are running high and are further constrained by the prevailing climate which suffers from the lack of strategic trust between the two sides.

The unclear intentions of China in the South China Sea coupled by its growing assertiveness as reflected by its latest actions, e.g. its uncompromising stance on the nine-dash line, construction of artificial islands, have put the relations in lesser than ideal conditions. Hence, it becomes unsurprising that **the South China Sea issue is becoming a litmus test in the Philippine-China relations**.¹⁸ While the two sides continue to underscore that the issue is not the end-all and be-all of the relations and should not hold hostage the overall bilateral ties, the dispute has undeniably taken center stage. Even the robust economic ties, with **China being the Philippines third largest trading market**, have not been able to act as a credible deterrent in tempering the slide of the relations¹⁹.

The Philippines is cognizant that there exists an **asymmetrical relation** – not only in terms of power but of material capabilities as well, between itself and China²⁰. To manage this, the Philippines has turned to a number of policy options and strategies in response to the dynamic changes in the Philippine-China relations. Paramount of which is the use of the Aquino administration's **multilateral track approach**, in particular the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other ASEAN-led mechanisms, e.g. ASEAN Plus One meetings with its Dialogue Partners,

16 Aileen S.P. Baviera, "The Influence of Domestic Politics on Philippine Foreign Policy: The case of Philippines-China relations since 2004," *RSIS Working Paper*, no. 241 (June 5, 2012).

17 PaternoEsmael II. "Why China prefers Arroyo over Aquino." *Rappler*, 24 July 2012, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/9128-how-china-views-aquino-arroyo> (accessed May 20, 2015).

18 Aileen S.P. Baviera, "China-ASEAN Conflict and Cooperation in the South China Sea: Managing Power Asymmetry", in *The Study of National Security at 50: Reawakenings*. A Golden Anniversary Publication of the National Defense College of the Philippines, 2013.

19 *Ibid*

20 *Ibid*

ASEAN Plus Three, ASEAN Regional Forum, and East Asia Summit, to adroitly manage the relations. Through this, the Philippines puts premium on institutions and their norms to bind and socialize China so that its actions are more predictable²¹. The Philippines strongly advocates for a **rules-based approach** and to uphold norms shared by members of the international community in solving disputes²². Hence, the filing of arbitration case versus China is consistent with the rules-based approach which the country adheres to and is a strong manifestation of the commitment to peacefully settle the maritime dispute using instrument of international law. Aside from the use of multilateral track approach and heavy emphasis on institutions, the Philippines has also sought to strengthen its military capabilities to project a more credible external defense. The challenges posed by China's aggressiveness particularly in the South China Sea have served as a strong impetus for the Philippines to modernize its military that has long focused on internal defense²³. The **defense sector is currently seeing upgrade** in terms of hardware acquisition and training activities for capacity building. Until the Philippines embarked on its defense modernization, the country was one of the lowest military spenders in the Asia-Pacific region²⁴.

5. Philippines-European Union Relations

The relations between the Philippines and the European Union date back to the formal establishment of ties on May 12, 1964 with the then European Community (EC). The bilateral relations rest on the 1980 EC-ASEAN Cooperation Agreement which also serves as its legal basis. To further strengthen the then nascent ties, the Framework Agreement for Development Cooperation between the two parties in 1984 was concluded to serve as the basis for the assisted development projects of the then EC to the Philippines.

Since the formal establishment of diplomatic ties, **Philippines-EU relations have been broadened and deepened**. To further cement the relations, the two parties signed the EU - Philippines Partnership Cooperation Agreement (PCA) on July 11, 2012, the first agreement between the two parties since 1980²⁵. The PCA is designed to cover cooperation in the areas of political,

21 Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 113-157.

22 Department of Foreign Affairs, "SFA Statement on the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings Against China," <http://www.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-06-27-21-50-36/unclos/216-sfa-statement-on-the-unclos-arbitral-proceedings-against-china> (accessed May 21, 2015).

23 Sam Perlo and Carina Solmirano, "Military spending and regional security in the Asia-Pacific," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2014: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198.

24 *Ibid*

25 European Union, "The EU and the Philippines sign Partnership and Cooperation Agreement," http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131696.pdf (accessed May 25, 2015).

security, economic, and social affairs and specific issues that are of mutual interest to both the Philippines and the EU. The conclusion of the PCA, according to High Representative Catherine Ashton, is a testament to the convergence of the beliefs that both EU and Philippines uphold, in particular in the areas of human rights and democracy²⁶. Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario, meanwhile, remarked that the PCA gives the Philippines and the EU the opportunity and the basis to work closely together on issues such as migration, attaining development goals, expanding trade and investment, improving development cooperation, and promoting international peace and security, and human rights.²⁷

Mechanism such as the PCA with the Philippines is an instrument for the European Union to further and deepen its engagement with the country²⁸, in particular, and with the Asian region, in general. While it is specifically crafted to push forward EU's interests, the success of which will only be limited if it does not align with the Philippines national interests. The convergence of EU's interests to that of the Philippines own agenda contributed to the further strengthening, deepening, and broadening of ties between the two sides. As a result, the EU and the Philippines have found synergies and cohesion in combatting non-traditional security issues such as cybercrime, counter-terrorism, border control, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear risk mitigation, and export control strategic trade management, to name a few. **The meeting and commonality of objectives and interests, therefore, can be considered the thread that binds the policies of the Philippines and European Union and is a strong starting point to push the relations further.** This is in addition to the already robust economic relations that the two sides enjoy.



6. Philippines-ASEAN relations

The Philippines has always aligned itself with countries that share the same values and principles²⁹. Hence, on August 8, 1967, the Philippines together with other four Southeast Asian countries – namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand – established the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Being among the five founding members of ASEAN, the Philippines gives heavy emphasis

26 European Union, "Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the signature of the EU-Philippines Partnership and Cooperation Agreement," http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131695.pdf (accessed May 25, 2015).

27 Ambassador Guy Ledoux, "The EU and the Philippines: A Dynamic Partnership" (presented at the Center for Development Management Ambassadors' Forum, October 5, 2012).

28 Delegation of the European Union to the Philippines, "The European Union and the Philippines: We Inspire Each Other," http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/philippines/documents/more_info/publications/eu_ph_weinspireeachother_brochure.pdf (accessed May 25, 2015).

29 Del Rosario, 2012.

and importance on its relations with the regional bloc³⁰.

ASEAN is one of the cornerstones of the Philippines' foreign policy. This is manifested in the resolve of the country to promote a more peaceful, stable, and free Southeast Asia³¹ through the pursuit of different initiatives – both in the policy making sphere and functional cooperation activities. To illustrate, the Philippines actively participates in the shaping of ASEAN's regional agenda that will ensure the bloc's relevance and importance in the international arena. More importantly, the Philippines has constantly affirmed that ASEAN Centrality should be promoted at all times – both in the bloc's internal and external dealings, and that ASEAN continues to remain as the driver of regionalism and act as an interlocutor between competing regional powers. The underlying agenda of this is the Philippines' strong support to strengthen a regional order that promotes good behavior and which adheres to internationally accepted norms and rules for the benefit of the region³².

ASEAN is not a supranational organization but rather a regional association. The member-states remain as the reference point of a regional organization that aspires to be a community by the end of 2015. ASEAN, as a bloc, does not have a common foreign policy but strives to achieve a common position in issues that affect the region. The stand and/or policy direction taken by the respective member-states is shaped by and grounded on their national interests and agenda. Herein also lies the friction in ASEAN. Due to different political, economic, and socio-cultural systems of the ten members, there are instances wherein the member-states take on varying and conflicting positions on issues. Given this context, the Philippines has to manage delicately its relations³³ in order to push forward its interest, in particular in sensitive issues like protection and promotion of human rights, democracy, just to name a few. **There are instances wherein there is no alignment of interests and agenda, hence the Philippines, along with other ASEAN member-states take to tend the least common denominator in order to have consensus on issues so as to arrive at an agreement.** Also, the Philippines is cognizant that there exists differences in the perception and threat analysis that confront the member-states. This is perfectly exemplified in the 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting debacle M.C. Abad, "Regional Politics," in *The Philippines in ASEAN* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc, 2011), 15. wherein there was a failure to issue a Joint Communiqué.

Alongside the multilateral framework in the conduct of Philippine-ASEAN relations, there is also a strengthening of the bilateral ties with fellow member-states that happens in parallel. There is a convergence of national interest, specifically in the traditional security issues, which could be brought about by perceived common threat in the regional environment. **For instance, the Philippines and Vietnam are studying to elevate their bilateral ties to that of strategic partnership.** In a statement released

30 Presidential Communications Operations Office. "What are the Philippines' Major Activities in ASEAN," Backgrounder, <http://www.pcoo.gov.ph/asean2012/backgrounder.htm> (accessed May 28, 2015).

31 Del Rosario, 2012.

32 *Ibid*

33 M.C. Abad, "Regional Politics," in *The Philippines in ASEAN* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc, 2011), 15.

by the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs following the conclusion of the first meeting of Philippines-Vietnam Joint Commission on Concluding a Strategic Partnership, the two sides “*on the basis of amity, mutual respect and cooperation, the bilateral relations are growing in various aspects, including in political, trade and investment, fisheries, marine and oceanic affairs, defense and security cooperation, among others*”³⁴. The improvement in the relations between the Philippines and Vietnam is worth noting given the minimal interaction in the past.



7. Dealing with the Powers

The regional strategic environment has a lot of impact on the foreign policy behavior of the Philippines. The increased tensions in the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea brought about by China’s greater assertiveness has forced the **Philippines to seek closer ties** with some major powers.

The defense alliance with the US, which has existed since 1951 has been revived and the Philippines has been working with its ally in improving its maritime domain awareness and providing a renewed boost to the military modernization program. The Philippines and Japan are now strategic partners, which is an enhanced level of bilateral relations, and the two countries have been working closely together on shared security concerns. **The way forward is for the US, Japan, and the Philippines to work on a trilateral basis for security cooperation** and consultation. Shared values and convergence in security concerns will further boost the ties of the three nation-states. The US rebalance is also premised on its allies sharing the burden of providing security for the region; Japan and the Philippines, which are both US allies, are supportive of the rebalance. The closer relationship between Japan and the Philippines contributes to better burden sharing and improved coordination on various activities including but not limited to humanitarian assistance and disaster response, search and rescue, and maritime domain awareness.

In its relationship with multilateral organizations, the depth can be assessed by geopolitical considerations. With the EU, the Philippines sought improved ties in more **pragmatic** (i.e. economic) terms. The agreement with the EU provides a policy framework for the two sides to work on a whole range of issues, including security. Closer ties that will encourage the EU to work with the Philippines on strategic issues including the modernization of the AFP and stability in the South China Sea are desirable and should be a major focus of the diplomatic and political activities of the two sides. As a founding member of ASEAN, the Philippines has a stake in the success of the regional association. Recently, the South

34 Department of Foreign Affairs, “1st Meeting of Philippines-Vietnam Joint Commission on Concluding a Strategic Partnership Held in Manila,” <http://www.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-06-27-21-50-36/dfa-releases/5302-1st-meeting-of-philippines-viet-nam-joint-commission-on-concluding-a-strategic-partnership-held-in-manila> (accessed May 28, 2015).

China Sea dispute has been the leading concern that the country has been raising in ASEAN. Along with Vietnam, the Philippines has been actively seeking the support of ASEAN member-states in an effort to curtail Chinese assertiveness in the maritime and territorial disputes. Given the nature of the regional association, the response has been quite mixed: while the concerns of the Philippines have been noted, the other member-states are also considerate of their own interests that involve China. Thus, China has not been called out but the joint communiqués and other **declarations coming from ASEAN have also shown that there is concern about the increasing tensions, despite the tepid language.** The Philippines needs to work closely with other ASEAN member-states if it is to advance its interest at the regional level.

The relationship with China has been the most challenging. At one point, China and the Philippines were quite close, especially during the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. However, the relationship turned difficult during Aquino’s presidency. The relationship with China is one of the most important bilateral relationships that the Philippines will need to be thoughtful about. China is a geographic reality and the second largest economy in the world. The Philippines needs to approach China strategically; it will **need an approach that can adroitly mix the on-going legal tussle over the maritime boundaries, with political and economic diplomacy that can maximize the benefits for the country.**



Conclusion

As the Philippines approaches **a new phase in its electoral and political life,** there is an **opportunity to reassess its foreign relations.** Small states do not have the same tools as strong states in shaping their desired foreign policy outcome, but they can work on their bilateral relations to improve their status economically, politically, and diplomatically. The Philippines’ relations with major and middle powers are, to a large extent, determined by the strategic changes that are happening in the regional and global environment.

The rivalry that seems to be happening between China and the United States is the most important strategic issue that the Philippine foreign policymakers must take into consideration. **China is a geographic reality while the United States is a strategic necessity not only for the Philippines but for the whole East Asian region.** These two countries constitute the two bilateral relationships that will pose a challenge to the leaders of the Philippines. What foreign and national security policy will be formulated or calibrated to address this challenge is yet uncertain but it will need extensive reflection as this will shape the country’s response to the “Asian Century.” Never has geopolitics been more important than ever to the Philippines.