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THE PHILIPPINES' INSTITUTIONALISED ALLIANCE WITH THE US: SURVIVING DUTERTE'S CHINA APPEASEMENT POLICY

Andrea Chloe Wong and Alexander C. Tan¹

This paper examines the security partnership of the United States-Philippines during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. Using the theoretical framework of alliance institutionalisation, we identified several factors that can determine the strength of alliances and security partnerships. Applying this framework, we suggest that because of deep alliance institutionalisation, the security partnership between the Philippines and the United States is actually quite resilient despite President Duterte's position on this issue.

Keywords: US; Philippines; Security partnership; alliance institutionalisation; President Rodrigo Duterte

Introduction

In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte assumed the presidency with a promise to reorient the Philippines' foreign relations. Duterte declared his intent to chart an "independent" foreign policy that deemphasised the country's extensive reliance on the US while revitalising relations with China, which had experienced a political standstill during the administration of Benigno Aquino III.¹ This shift was brought about by Duterte's personal hostility toward the US and a pragmatic focus on economic imperatives that emphasised economic engagement with China while making concessions in Manila's maritime sovereignty conflict with Beijing.

This article evaluates the developments in the Philippines' alliance with the US during Duterte's presidency. In the context of an adversarial president, the alliance faced the prospect of the Philippines' abrogation of significant aspects of military cooperation,

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possibly even culminating in the termination of the US military presence in the country.² But nonetheless, Philippine-US security cooperation continues. The mechanics of the alliance, including joint military exercises, intelligence-gathering support, counter-insurgency assistance, and defence material acquisition remain. This begs the question: how do we explain the alliance's resilience in the face of Duterte's hostility against the US?

We contend that the concept of alliance institutionalisation is useful in understanding the strength of Philippine-US security cooperation. Alliance institutionalisation suggests that the design of institutions such as alliances ensures its survival during crisis and uncertainties.³ Under Duterte, the Philippines' alliance with the US has faced various threats due to his antipathy towards the Americans and his policy of de facto appeasement towards China. Duterte's appeasement policy is intended to pacify or conciliate with the Chinese by making diplomatic and strategic concessions in order to avoid conflict and renew bilateral ties,⁴ which consequently undermined Philippine-US relations.

Against this background, we then evaluate the factors that promote alliance institutionalisation and explain how each of them contributes in fortifying the utility and value of the two countries' security relationship. In particular, we examine three factors: the alliance mentality in the Philippines' bureaucracy, the regularisation of alliance activities, and the established alliance benefits that the country gains from the US. We conclude by suggesting that the dynamics of long-term alliance institutionalisation will ensure that the Philippines' military partnership with the US will outlast Duterte's presidency.

Alliances in International Relations

Alliances are a longstanding concept in realist theory, serving as practical examples of the operation of the related concept of balancing and balance of power politics.⁵ As a foreign policy strategy, 'balancing' encompasses the actions that a state takes in order to equalise the odds against more powerful states and to prevent them from upsetting the status quo.⁶ This drives a state to unite with others in a defensive coalition, resulting in the formation of alliances as part of a balancing strategy.

Alliances are typically formed as a counterweight to the threats of a hegemon or a rising power. These threats are typically based on power, proximity, specific offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions.⁷ States establish alliances by pooling their resources, abilities, and efforts as a form of security against a common aggressor state.⁸ Alliances can be symmetric or asymmetric, highly institutional or largely informal, underpinned by the allies' relative status and/or power.⁹ Alliances can also be categorised in terms of their wartime or peacetime roles; offensive or defensive postures; permanent or temporary status; and bilateral or multilateral constitution.¹⁰ Whatever form they take, alliances perform an important role in the operation of the international system.

To strengthen their alliances, some states opt to institutionalise their security cooperation. The concept of alliance institutionalisation describes this process as the “degree to which governing organs and institutions are created within an alliance as well as the extent to which military cooperation is regularised through peacetime activities.”¹¹ In practical terms, this includes the development of formal institutions and regular peacetime cooperation to enhance military interoperability.¹² Building institutions within an alliance reflects the members’ increased commitment to achieve larger security objectives.

The promotion of a strong institutionalisation in an alliance is necessary to bolster both its viability and credibility. A more institutionalised alliance can result in greater influence during policymaking and implementation process.¹³ Cultivating formal institutions is also a means to ensure that the alliance will function more smoothly and will not fall prey to opportunism, free-riding or defection.¹⁴ Moreover, alliance institutionalisation is an important mechanism to formalise bilateral or multilateral commitments. In particular, democratic regimes prefer institutionalised alliances to constrain the actions of potential successor governments, or to shield it from domestic opposition groups that may abandon the alliance once in power.¹⁵ This reinforces Rafferty’s (2003) argument that a strong institution is a key factor in building an alliance that survives over time.¹⁶

Generally, the underlying assumption in this article is that greater institutionalisation leads to alliance durability and enhances alliance performance. Morrow (1994) concurs with this idea by developing a formal model featuring alliance “tightness,” which determines the level of peacetime coordination and cooperation activities between states.¹⁷ However, Weitsman (2014) argues that, while institutionalisation can enhance alliance durability, it can also create rigidity within the organisation.¹⁸ Morrow (1994) counters this by claiming that, through institutionalisation, alliance tightness nonetheless improves the ability of allies to fight together and heightens the likelihood of fulfilling their obligations, thus resulting in enhanced alliance cohesion.¹⁹

As a complex process, alliance institutionalisation expects allies to establish a web of hierarchies and structures in order to efficiently achieve collective security goals. These structures can be both formal and informal, rigid or fluid. But all are designed to achieve a stronger bond between and among allies. In the case of the Philippines’ alliance with the US, there are three inter-related factors that strengthen alliance institutionalisation. These are the alliance mentality inherent among officials in the Philippines’ bureaucracy, the regularisation of joint military activities, and the significant security benefits gained from the partnership. Each of these factors contribute to the resilience of Philippine-US alliance.

But in any alliance, there is the possibility of adjustments in the states' national interests or security goals that may cause political uncertainties in bilateral cooperation. This is typically caused by changes in their global or domestic environments. In the Philippines' case, such uncertainty was especially evident when Duterte came into power and undermined the country's security partnership with the US in favor of renewing economic ties with China.

Duterte's Appeasement Policy Towards China

Since the start of his term, Duterte has implemented a policy of appeasement in dealing with China, which is considered a rational tactic for small states such as the Philippines. According to Larson (2001), this policy reflects national interests as it "adjusts the balance of power to preserve an equilibrium between the relative power of states and the distribution of benefits."²⁰ As a foreign policy strategy, appeasement pursued by small states typically overlaps with engagement and bandwagoning. Engagement refers to efforts by states to enhance bilateral exchange by way of positive and non-coercive means.²¹ Bandwagoning occurs when a state chooses to align its policies with the strongest or most threatening state it faces.²² In turn, the state disproportionately gains in the spoils it jointly acquires with its stronger counterpart in what Schweller (1994) characterised as "bandwagoning for profit."²³

Similar to the Philippines, most states in Asia tend to adopt varying degrees of engagement towards China. Essentially, they are duly sensitive to China's fast-growing economic and military capabilities and therefore, seek to make good use of its influence as a major power. Chung (2010) observed that "few states (in East Asia) have the explicit agenda of challenging or transforming China's behavior. Thus, most of them work on engaging, fostering, and nurturing (economic) interdependence with this emergent power."²⁴

But the case of the Philippines under the Duterte administration indicates that its efforts go beyond engagement to include appeasement of China, in order to reduce the likelihood of outright confrontation. It essentially aims "to pacify, or to conciliate by political, economic, or other considerations... to avert aggression."²⁵ Besides obtaining benefits from China's emergence as an economic power, Duterte's appeasement policy therefore seeks to warm up bilateral ties that were effectively frozen during the Aquino administration. Such policy highlights his strategic rationale that "the Philippines would be better off being in the good graces of a powerful China and profit from it, rather than be the target of its wrath."²⁶

Yet such appeasement comes with a price. Recent developments indicate that the Duterte administration favors the promotion of its economic agenda with China more than the pursuit of its security goals. It is no surprise then that his government downplayed the Philippines' arbitration victory in 2016 at the Permanent Court of Arbitration against

China's historic claim of its nine-dash line over the South China Sea. According to Duterte, "In the play of politics, now, I will set aside the arbitral ruling. I will not impose anything on China."²⁷ His refusal to push for the Philippines' maritime claims resulted in USD 24 billion in loans, credit and investments pledges to fund his administration's "Build, Build, Build" program, claiming that "China is a very important ingredient there."²⁸ The program includes the construction of critical infrastructure projects such as railways, airports, and hydroelectric dams necessary for the Philippines' economic growth. Meanwhile during talks of joint oil and gas exploration with China, Duterte said Chinese President Xi Jinping had promised to give "the Philippines the bigger chunk – 60 percent – of the revenues from the planned joint exploration." In exchange, China wants the Philippines to "set aside the arbitral ruling."²⁹ Duterte's statements essentially reveal his appeasement policy that seeks to gain as many economic concessions as possible from the Chinese rather than be trapped in a political deadlock by pushing for the country's maritime claims.

And in the process of appeasing the Chinese, Duterte downgraded the Philippines' long-established alliance with the US. This effectively substitutes the Philippine-US security arrangement with Philippine-China economic ties as the country's most important bilateral relationship.³⁰ In his October 2016 state visit to China, Duterte announced his "separation from the US, both in military, not maybe social, but economics also. America has lost." Referring to China, Duterte declared in front of Xi Jinping and members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): "I've realigned myself in your ideological flow."³¹

Duterte's "Independent" Foreign Policy

Eventually, Duterte announced the promotion of an 'independent foreign policy' that seeks to move the Philippines away from its dependence on the US. He declared that: "We will be charting a course of our own... It will not be dependent on America. And it will be a line that is not intended to please anybody but the Filipino interest."³² Referring to the US, Duterte declared: "Do not treat us like a doormat because you'll be sorry for it. I will not speak with you. I can always go to China."³³ Such statement highlights the emotional underpinning behind Duterte's rational appeasement policy and sets it apart from Aquino's.

This was apparent during the conduct of the Balikatan (translated as "shoulder-to-shoulder") military exercises between the Philippines and US in 2017. There were major changes in the format of Balikatan 2017, which removed the usual high-profile live-fire components, and shifted its focus on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) and counter-terrorism exercises. It was scaled down compared to previous exercises that featured massive combat drills directed at a hypothetical threat emanating from the South China Sea.³⁴ The past exercises were regarded as a veiled warning from the Philippines-US alliance that Chinese expansion in the South China Sea would

not go unchallenged. Philippine Army Spokesman Major Frank Sayson explained that “the downsizing of the exercises was in response to Duterte’s dislike of war games with Washington.”³⁵ Thus, the Balikatan can be considered as one of the early manifestations of Duterte’s goal of rebalancing Philippine foreign policy, which has meant less dependence on the US and more attention to countries like China and Russia.

Duterte’s Grievances Against the US

In line with his independent foreign policy, Duterte’s goal of appeasing China essentially dovetails with his plan to detach the Philippines away from its reliance on the US. His policy generally suggests a combination of his personal, historical, ideological animosity against the Americans.

On a personal note, he views the US as the ‘enemy’ based on a long-held perception of American colonial subjugation of the Philippines. At an early age, he was taught that the US was guilty of grave crimes, often referring to the American massacre of Filipino Muslims during the colonial history of the Philippines.³⁶ The massacre took place near Jolo’s Bud Dajo volcano in the country’s south in 1906. During that incident, American troops killed over 600 Moro including unarmed women and children.

Moreover, Duterte was furious about a case in 2002 when the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped Michael Meiring flee the country, who was then charged with possession of explosives. He perceived the incident, which occurred in Davao city during his term as Mayor, as an American violation of Philippine sovereignty. According to Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana: “the Meiring incident still rankles Duterte to this day... He just feels hurt that the United States can come in, unannounced in his city, grab a person that is under investigation by the police, and bring him out of the country.”³⁷

Duterte also abhors the US, along with the rest of the Western world, because it led a ‘concerted condemnation’ in his war on drugs.³⁸ The US government, particularly under the Obama administration, has issued public statements expressing concerns over the growing number of extrajudicial killings and human rights violations in the Philippines.³⁹ Duterte has since accused it of interfering in his country’s domestic affairs.⁴⁰

These factors feed into Duterte’s skepticism of America’s commitment to provide military support to the Philippines, as specified under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. He doubts that the US will come to the aid of the Philippines in the event of an armed conflict with China in the South China Sea. According to Jesus Dureza, one of Duterte’s security advisers: “The idea is that our allies are not going to go to war for us, so why should we align with them?”⁴¹ Moreover, Duterte has also implied that the US government has not been helpful in preventing China’s illegal construction of artificial islands

in the past: "If America cared, it would have sent its aircraft carriers and missile frigates the moment China started reclaiming land in contested territory, but no such thing happened."⁴²

Because of these factors, Duterte has expressed strong views against the US, threatening to put the alliance in peril since the start of his term. In 2016, he announced his desire to remove a small contingent of American counterterrorism troops from the southern island of Mindanao and asked the rest to leave the Philippines in the next two years.⁴³ Duterte also wanted to suspend joint patrols and military exercises and declared that the ongoing amphibious beach landing exercise between the two countries will be the last under his administration. In addition, he warned that the 28 military exercises carried out with American forces each year will be halted.⁴⁴

More alarming is Duterte's announcement about abrogating the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). On 11 February 2020, his officials gave official notice to the US embassy regarding its termination. The VFA is a security pact that allows the US to station its troops on a rotational basis in the Philippines and provides legal basis for annual joint exercises and military activities. Signed in May 1999, the agreement was established following the Philippine Senate's rejection in 1991 of extending the presence of US bases in the country.⁴⁵ Despite an anticipated multi-agency review, Duterte's sudden decision to scrap the VFA was brought about by his fury against the US government's cancellation of the visa for his political allies who were linked in his war on drugs.⁴⁶ And without the agreement, the Philippines' alliance with the US is weakened: "This will make the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) practically useless and the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty a hollow agreement."⁴⁷

Institutional Factors in the Philippine-US Alliance

Yet despite Duterte's various threats and grievances, the Philippines' alliance with the US endures. This is because of the institutionalised factors that sustain the alliance's purpose and functions. According to Oelsner (2013), "alliances, like other international organisations, are capable of developing independent organisational identities and interests."⁴⁸ Essentially, they are perpetuated by the following factors: the alliance mentality in the Philippines' bureaucracy; the regularisation of alliance activities; and the benefits that the alliance provides for the Philippines.

Alliance Mentality in the Philippines' Bureaucracy

The driving forces behind the institutionalisation of an alliance are the officials and personnel inside both the US and Philippine bureaucracies. Their personal involvement and regular interactions sustain the alliance's operations as they organise, implement, and participate in various collaborative activities. These individuals have an appreciation for the alliance's benefits, as they are socialised into the perspectives

and processes favorable to it.⁴⁹ They hold a distinct mentality that they can extend in the governments' policy making and implementation process. Successive generations of these individuals tend to organise epistemic communities within institutions like the armed forces, defence department, and even the foreign ministry, which are expected to mold policies to sustain the alliance.⁵⁰

This alliance mentality is evident in the Philippines' bureaucracy, and in particular, its military and defence establishments. Despite his anti-American stance, Duterte selected experienced individuals who are partial to the Philippines' alliance with the US. Fidel Ramos, the country's former president who went to the US Military Academy at West Point and graduated in 1950, became a senior consultant in the Duterte administration.⁵¹ Hermogenes Esperon, former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) who previously worked closely with US forces in Operation Enduring Freedom - Philippines, became National Security adviser to Duterte.⁵² And Delfin Lorenzana, who previously served as Philippine Defense Attaché in Washington DC for more than a decade, became the Secretary of the Department of National Defense.⁵³ Each official possessed a personal relationship with Duterte and carries with them years of direct exposure and extensive involvement in the Philippine-US alliance.⁵⁴

These high-ranking officials in the Duterte administration function as advocates of the US security alliance. Their efforts to defend the alliance against the president's attacks are evident in their public pronouncements. In a newspaper editorial, former president Ramos assailed Duterte's mistreatment of the alliance stating, "are we throwing away decades of military partnership, tactical proficiency, compatible weaponry, predictable logistics and soldier-to soldier camaraderie just like that?"⁵⁵

Aside from Ramos' rebuke, other officials took it upon themselves to 'clarify' and interpret the president's statements in a manner that is more amenable to their intent to preserve the alliance. When Duterte announced that the scheduled 2016 military exercises between the Philippines and the US would be the last during his term, Esperon explained that he understood the announcement to mean that the exercises were "the last for the year."⁵⁶ Regarding the suspension of joint sea patrols in the South China Sea, Lorenzana expressed doubts about the president's final plans. According to him: "They will not be conducted anymore until we clarify if he (Duterte) means what he says."⁵⁷ Aside from merely downplaying the president's incendiary statements, Lorenzana made efforts to "educate" the president by providing a "long list of benefits" the Philippines consistently gains from its alliance with the US.⁵⁸

The intention of these officials to protect the alliance essentially reflects their pro-alliance mindsets. Aware of this reality, Duterte even went as far as saying that his own Defense Secretary may have been compromised. "He stayed in America for a long time. I know he's a CIA agent...but that's okay."⁵⁹ More generally, most of the country's military personnel largely favors the alliance. Even Duterte himself is aware of the extent in

which support for the alliance is ingrained in them, especially those within the AFP. In a speech, Duterte noted how “our soldiers are really pro-American, that I cannot deny... almost all officers will go to America to study... that’s why they have rapport and I cannot deny that.”⁶⁰ And because of this, Duterte has frequently backtracked on his public pronouncements. His plan to scrap the modernisation program drew opposition from the AFP, which was in the process of implementing a military upgrade for territorial defense. To avoid alienating them, Duterte decided to continue with several defence plans and contracts that the previous Aquino administration had already approved.⁶¹

And because of their ingrained support for Philippine-US alliance, members of the defence establishment are largely skeptical about Duterte’s policy toward China. Military officers who have spent their lives and careers working with the US military are uneasy with the sudden and dramatic shift in the country’s foreign policy. In particular, Duterte’s friendly stance goes against widely-held notions of a China threat, which do not sit well with the AFP: “They are also anxious that the president is throwing away the only card that the Philippines has up in its sleeve in the territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea – the American security umbrella.”⁶²

Aside from the defence establishment, officials from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also persuaded Duterte to reverse actions that weaken the alliance. In response to the VFA’s abrogation, DFA Secretary Teodoro Locsin declared that “a review of it would be a more appropriate response.”⁶³ He also said that abrogating the agreement would mean “scrapping more than 300 joint activities with US forces, which the Philippine military and law enforcement agencies need to enhance their capabilities in countering threats to national security.”⁶⁴ Eventually, Duterte announced in June 2020 a six-month suspension of the VFA’s termination (that was supposed to end on August 9 or 180 days after the DFA served the notice of termination to the US Embassy on 11 February 2020). And in November 2020, he extended the suspension by another six months. According to DFA Secretary Locsin, such extension in the abrogation of the VFA is to “enable us to find a more enhanced, mutually beneficial, mutually agreeable, and more effective and lasting arrangement on how to move forward in our mutual defence.”⁶⁵ Both deferment in the cancellation of the VFA is considered a welcome development by alliance supporters in the Philippines.⁶⁶

The actions cited above reflect the reluctance of pro-alliance government personnel to concede to a populist leader who challenges their preferred policy stance. High-ranking officials recurrently clarify or interpret Duterte’s pronouncements, or advise him against implementing actions that may put the alliance at risk. Thus, the AFP was able to protest against the president’s contentious plans of cancelling its modernisation program, and the DFA was able to convince him to at least suspend the abrogation of the VFA. Aware of their bias for the US, Duterte has repeatedly reversed some of his statements and decisions to avoid alienating his officials and the military.

Regularisation of Alliance Activities

In addition, alliance institutionalisation is evident between the Philippines and the US through its regular defence diplomacy and routine military activities. While Duterte's anti-US rants have captured international headlines, few of his pronouncements against American military presence and joint military exercises were actually translated into policy directives. And without formal instructions, the alliance carried on with its normal operations. Notwithstanding Duterte's declared intention to withdraw American presence in Mindanao, joint counterterrorism efforts between the AFP and US military continued. Meanwhile, military activities resumed, despite Duterte's threat of cancellation.⁶⁷

In particular, the Balikatan exercises between the Philippines and the US serve as a critical reminder that the alliance continues to thrive. These military exercises remained, albeit in a smaller scale and with a different strategic focus. Following Duterte's decree to end all war games, the AFP focused on non-traditional security issues as a way to justify the exercises. US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim described this crucial shift in the Balikatan exercises as "cosmetic changes."⁶⁸ And while there were fewer joint exercises compared to previous years during the Aquino administration, the fact that they actually happened at all was a significant triumph for the alliance.

The regular military cooperation between the two countries through the Balikatan exercises signifies the institutionalisation of the alliance. Despite threats from the president to cancel them, efforts to continue security cooperation reflects strong commitment to the alliance held by both countries' military institutions. Speaking at the closing ceremonies of the 2017 Balikatan exercises, DND Secretary Lorenzana vowed: "let us continue this yearly, not just to meet our obligation under the Mutual Defense Treaty, but also to strengthen the bond of friendship."⁶⁹

Alliance Benefits for the Philippines

Alliance institutionalisation is apparent in the customary benefits that the Philippines enjoy. In terms of military equipment, the AFP still considers the US as the only trusted and reliable supplier of military hardware. The Philippine government may have accepted assault and sniper rifles worth USD 3.3 million from China after the US Congress blocked the sale of weapons for fear of arming its police force in Duterte's war on drugs.⁷⁰ But China's donations to the Philippines remain small compared to the US. For more than a decade, the US provided nearly a billion US dollars of military hardware including drones, ships, and surveillance planes, among others.⁷¹ Thus, the AFP views Duterte's plan of acquiring weapons from China and even Russia as unnecessary, if not impractical, since it has no history of operating their equipment.⁷² It prefers to acquire military hardware from the US because of its interoperability, logistics, and training complementarity.

Even Chinese military observers believe that there will be compatibility problems if China pushes through with more arms sale to the Philippines. They are aware that the AFP “is accustomed to US-style weaponry, which is totally different from Chinese designs and production.”⁷³ Moreover, they believe that China may not wholly sell military hardware to the Philippines as Duterte wishes due to lack of mutual trust, not to mention the awkwardness on the thought of the Philippines using Chinese weapons to fight against China in the event of a military scuffle in the South China Sea.⁷⁴

In addition, the Philippines benefits from the VFA as a crucial security deterrence from external threats. Despite Duterte's initial decision to abrogate the VFA, he ultimately suspended it twice in light of “political and other developments in the region.”⁷⁵ According to DFA Secretary Locsin, Duterte's decision is related to looming Chinese assertiveness: “having a rise in military tensions in the South China Sea was not helping anybody.”⁷⁶ This includes China's establishment of two research stations and the creation of two new administrative districts, one of which is to govern areas in the Spratlys that falls within the Philippines' EEZ. Moreover, the growing presence of Chinese maritime militia and the increasing prospects of the Chinese government declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the contested sea, adds to the security anxiety of the Philippines.⁷⁷ By suspending the termination of the VFA, the Philippines recognises its strategic advantage against China's illegal actions in its EEZ.

Most importantly, the Duterte administration was able to benefit from the alliance during the Marawi siege in May 2017. The conflict in Marawi, Lanao del Sur was between Philippine government security forces through the AFP, and militant groups such as the Maute gang and the Abu Sayyaf linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It was regarded as the longest urban battle in the country's modern history that lasted for five months. The AFP eventually won the battle in Marawi due to America's military assistance as provided for in its alliance commitment to the Philippines.

Through the security alliance, the US gave support to the AFP in various forms. The AFP benefitted from the deployment of 300 to 500 American troops in Marawi, although the US clarified that there were no “boots on the ground,” which is prohibited under Philippine law.⁷⁸ Instead, the Americans were able to assist the AFP in intelligence gathering, aerial surveillance, and reconnaissance information. The AFP also utilised new equipment provided by the US government that included combat raiding boats and military arms to fight the militant groups.⁷⁹ Moreover, it was able to sharpen its combat skills through regular joint military training with American troops during peacetime cooperation that led to its victory in Marawi. This crucial assistance from the US essentially proved to Duterte the value of the alliance for the Philippines.

Initially, Duterte was unaware of US assistance during the Marawi conflict. He even insisted that he had “never approached any American for help,” insisting “we can do it without them.”⁸⁰ But in a press statement, the US Embassy in Manila announced that:

“At the request of the government of the Philippines, US special operations forces are assisting the AFP with ongoing operations in Marawi.”⁸¹ The assumption was that the AFP asked for US assistance without Duterte’s permission. By declaring martial law in Mindanao, Duterte had appointed DND Secretary Lorenzana as his top administrator, who was presumed to have requested America’s help to resolve the crisis in Marawi.

Eventually, Duterte had to acknowledge the significant contributions of the US after its involvement became public: “I have to be thankful. It’s already there.”⁸² He even stated that the US had redeemed itself through its military support for the Philippines. “I would not say they were our saviors, but they are our allies and they helped us,” adding “even today, they provide crucial equipment to our soldiers in Marawi to fight the terrorists.”⁸³ Despite his eagerness to highlight China’s contributions with its shipment of rifles for the AFP to use during the battle in Marawi, Duterte’s expression of gratitude nevertheless offered a symbolic recognition of the value of US alliance to the Philippines. For Philippine military analyst Jose Antonio Custodio: “The visibility of American assistance served as a potent signal to China of the still deep ties between the US and Philippines.”⁸⁴

The Endurance of the Alliance: Some Concluding Observations

The shift in the Philippines’ foreign policy under the Duterte administration has put into question the long-term viability of its alliance with the US. His intention to detach the Philippines away from the US is based on personal grievances and a strategic, economic based- rationale to renew relations with China. And in his effort to appease China and gain its favor, Duterte has consequently undermined the Philippines’ security ties with the US.

Yet the Philippines is able to preserve the alliance due to entrenched institutionalization that is manifested in its pro-alliance bureaucracy, its joint activities with the Americans, and its security benefits from the US. Philippine officials and military personnel who are largely keen supporters of the country’s defense ties with the US, are able to preserve the alliance by ignoring, downplaying, or opposing Duterte’s pressures against it. This is indicative of their ingrained alliance mentality that prompts them to steer government policies in a more reasonable direction and to carry on spreading the benefits of the alliance within the government. In addition, the continued military activities through the Balikatan exercises also demonstrated the resilience of the alliance despite Duterte’s threats of cancellation. These collaborative undertakings gave purpose to the alliance and are reflected in the two countries’ commitment to it. Moreover, the regular sale of US military hardware, the security deterrence function of the VFA, and the overwhelming American support during the Marawi crisis are some of the established benefits and strategic advantages that the Philippines enjoy. These attest to the lasting value of the alliance that even Duterte cannot ignore and disregard.

Because of these institutionalised elements in the Philippines, even China doubts that Duterte can terminate the alliance. Chinese military observers are aware that the alliance is very much institutionalised and ingrained in the Philippines' defence establishment. According to Wu Shicun, President of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies: "The Mutual Defence Treaty between the US and the Philippines is a legally binding document approved by the Philippine Supreme Court and a few words from Duterte cannot stop that deep military engagement with the US, which obviously wants to maintain and even boost its geopolitical sway in the region."⁸⁵

In spite of Duterte's independent foreign policy, China believes that the Philippines is neither brave nor powerful enough to split from the US despite his daring anti-American rhetoric. And even with its economic concessions, the Chinese government is skeptical that it could persuade the Philippines to totally side with it, in the same manner that Laos and Cambodia consistently do when forced to choose between the two great powers.⁸⁶ Although Duterte consistently adheres to his appeasement policy, China is still wary of his strategic motivations. It suspects that the president is merely playing the US off against it and vice versa, to achieve the greatest benefit for the Philippines.

Proof of this observation was Duterte's grant of "absolute pardon" for US Marine Lance Corporal Joseph Scott Pemberton in September 2020. Pemberton was charged for killing Jeffrey "Jennifer" Laude, a Filipino transgender woman in 2014, but was released and deported upon orders of Duterte despite serving less than six years of his 10-year prison term. Although DFA Secretary Locsin clarified that the US government did not request for Pemberton's release, such a move is seen as part of a bigger deal between the two countries involving "the Visiting Forces Agreement, American arms sales to the Philippines and the South China Sea."⁸⁷ Such improbable pardon from Duterte pointed to geopolitical signaling aimed at earning America's goodwill amidst the unrelenting maritime assertiveness of China.⁸⁸

Essentially, the institutionalisation of the Philippines' alliance with the US has insulated the harm that Duterte has inflicted on the bilateral relations. The dedicated commitment and long-term investments in cooperation between the two countries have effectively sustained the alliance from the worst of Duterte's outbursts. Alliance institutions nurtured among officials in the bureaucracy and military, promoted in regular collaborative activities, and endowed with strategic benefits are critical in defending this security partnership. These institutionalised elements in the alliance are expected to shield the alliance against politicians who seek to weaken or abandon the coalition, no matter how wide the authority they hold. Thus, the Philippines's alliance with the US will endure and is expected to outlast the Duterte administration.

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