

Country Briefing – The Republic of the Philippines

Political Briefing

Introduction

The Philippines is a minor military power of East Asia but is located in an extremely strategic position in the South China Sea (SCS). It shares a maritime border with Taiwan as a part of the First Island Chain, standing between China and its access to the Pacific Ocean, facilitating United States presence in Asia. In light of China's increasing assertiveness in striving to enhance its influence in the SCS, the Philippines view Chinese willingness to use force with worry, particularly given Chinese expansionism and belligerence in the SCS. Particularly in the context of Taiwan, Chinese actions threaten the 150,000 Filipinos who live on the island. Increasing Chinese belligerence to the possibility of a DPP presidency has for the time distracted them from their ongoing campaign against our territory in the SCS.

Strategic Objectives

The Philippines must find a balance among its interests and behave in the crisis accordingly. It is necessary to assert a firm place among the superpowers without compromising our security or sovereignty. In the case of Chinese annexation of Taiwan and subsequent militarisation of the island, the Philippines' security would be directly threatened, and an emboldened China would further push its claims in the SCS much to our detriment. Therefore, preventing such Chinese expansionism and keeping our claims in the SCS requires the backing of the United States. At the same time, however, we do not wish to merely become an extension of the United States. The Philippines do not wish to be drawn into a conflict in which we are likely to lose mightily. Thus, it is important we maintain good and constructive relations with all the regional powers (even if only to placate them) while preventing China from succeeding so that they may turn towards us later.

National Strategy

The Philippines is balancing its foreign relations between its traditional alliance with the United States (based around security), and with China (which offers economic opportunities).

The Philippines traditionally has had a strong relationship with the United States, spreading over several spheres but critically in security. This alliance is embodied by several agreements. The Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) of 1951 ensures US aid in case of an external attack on the Philippines. The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1998 increased military cooperation and allowed the US to station military personnel in the Philippines and to conduct joint exercises. Later the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Argument (EDCA) of 2014 declared an understanding the US will not establish a permanent base or presence but confirmed the US could rotate troops and operate facilities and enabled access for US ships and planes.

The previous government made a shift in foreign policy away from the US towards China in 2016, at the beginning of the Duterte presidency, and his "independent foreign policy". This approach aimed to protect the Philippines' sovereignty and avoid foreign interference in Philippine affairs, which led to a pivot away from the US and towards China. This enabled the Philippines to draw on economic benefits. However, this engagement with China was criticised for a lack of specific commitments and the small number of realised projects, while China continued to increase its presence in the SCS. This was compounded by the general sentiment of the

population supporting Taiwan over China and holding strong anti-China sentiments which are especially prone to flare up when China makes aggressive moves.

After a spate of aggressive Chinese moves in the SCS and a new administration coming to power, the Philippines have begun to strengthen the relationship with the United States again. In February 2020, the Philippines decided to terminate the VFA, but reversed course by mid-year and cancelled the termination. As a result, the United States reaffirmed its MDT obligations and declared the Chinese claim to the South China Sea as “unlawful”. In mid 2021 the VFA was formally brought back to force and US-Philippine relations have continued to improve. In 2022, the bases available for US use under ECDA were further expanded by the Philippines, with a focus on bases near Taiwan.

The SCS is our primary security concern and is a place of continuous disputes due to overlapping claims of various states, including the Philippines. The area has a great strategic and economic importance – about one-third of global maritime trade passes through it, and it contains rich natural resources and fishing areas of global significance. Under the so-called “nine-dash line”, China claims 85% of the area, and thus has a dispute with the Philippines over the Camago and Malampaya gas fields, Scarborough Shoal, and Spratly Islands. This puts a heavy strain on relations which further deteriorated in recent incidents including the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, and ongoing incidents with the Chinese. After the Philippines made a submission in 2013, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) initiated a trial investigating the Chinese claims in the SCS. In 2016, it ruled in favour of the Philippines and declared the Chinese claims unlawful. China rejected the ruling, even as the Philippines was turning towards China under Duterte’s “independent foreign policy.” Thus, the victory was downplayed.

The majority of Filipinos support Taiwanese independence, but the Philippines does not formally recognise Taiwan as a state and supports the “One China policy,” but maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan via de facto embassies - the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in the Philippines and the Manila Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei. In 2016 Taiwan rejected the PCA ruling just as China did (as Taiwan also claims the 9-dash line), and in 2013 and 2015, there were international incidents over fisheries between Taiwan and the Philippines. However, while the two states have disputes, they have caused little friction in the relationship.

The Philippines has close relations with Japan and Vietnam, which have been strengthened due to tensions over the SCS dispute. Japan is a major aid donor and there were talks of a defence treaty in 2016, but the plans were scrapped after the Philippine realignment towards China under Duterte. Nevertheless, good relations continue. Vietnam has a claim on the Spratly Islands overlapping with the Philippines, but they have a similar stance towards China as both disagree with the “nine-dash line” and thus maintain a good relationship. Vietnam supports the PCA ruling of 2016, and the Philippines in turn partially backs Vietnamese claims on the Paracel Islands. Moreover, Vietnam and the Philippines signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2010 which enables the sharing of information between their navies.

Summary

It is important that we avoid the ire of the Chinese Communist Party while improving US security commitments which comprise the underpinning of our security strategy. Helping Taiwan is both morally correct and something the electorate supports but must be carefully balanced against China’s backlash. Enhancing our presence and claims in the SCS is of importance, perhaps backed by those US security commitments, but once again the Chinese remain the major player and their wrath is not to be incurred lightly.