

Duterte's termination of the VFA: New strategic moves?

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ABSTRACT: President Duterte's termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) signals new strategic possibilities. It lessens U.S. ability to dictate on Philippine foreign policy; enhances overall cooperation with China leading to possible solutions to the South China Sea disputes; and widens space for the country's initiatives for a more independent foreign policy. Facts show that, under the right conditions, China is capable of economic or territorial concessions in exchange for greater security. The case of the protracted negotiations over the Sino-Russia border and the latest trade war deal with the US are good examples.

The other day, I had a chance to visit the Apolinario Mabini Museum in Tanauan, Batangas, which, it turned out, would have some relevance to our conversation today. The museum guide echoed well what Leon M. Guerrero once wrote: "When most Filipinos were on the one hand confident that the Americans would help them win their freedom, but on the other hand dubious of the strength of the young republic, Mabini predicted that the Americans would defeat the Spaniards, and warned: 'The Americans, like the Spaniards, like all the European powers, covet this beautiful Pearl of the Orient.'" Yes, he seemed to anticipate what President Trump himself would say that the Philippines is a "most prime piece of real estate from a military standpoint." Aguinaldo trusted the Americans and believed in the professed Filipino-American alliance against Spain. That historical mistake cost us blood and tears.

Our country, the first republic in Asia, could have enjoyed the fruits of true independence more than 40 years earlier and could have even avoided the tremendous suffering and destruction of the Second World War, which was fundamentally a conflict between the established and rising imperialist powers then. I thought we should always remember two historical lessons from the Mabini museum: one, that we cannot entrust our national destiny in the hands of a foreign power, regardless of which foreign power; and two, that we should try at all times to protect our own people from being embroiled in the conflict of the great powers, especially the nuclear-armed powers of today, be it in the name of military alliance or some ideological or political banner. Whether we are from the right or the left or center, regardless of our affiliations, we should try to unite as one to build a national consensus around these two painful historical lessons. (That President Duterte has presided over the return of the Balangiga bells by the Americans while President Aquino had earlier supported the upgrades of important historical museums like that of Mabini is symbolic of our capacity to do so. My aim today is to exchange ideas on how we can build such a national consensus.)

Before I proceed further, let me give credit where credit is due. When analyzing the important issues we face today, I have mostly tried to apply the analytical framework and methodology of Chairman Mao in his philosophical essay, "On Contradictions". I am aware of the highly critical view of China in our campus so, in a way, we will try to use something from China against China, which in itself reflects contradictions; we will try to use Mao's dialectical methods to help

refine our strategy for creatively dealing with our disputes with China, dealing with our issues with the United States, and maximizing the role of foreign policy in the pursuit of national interests. Mao's ideas on the universality and particularity of contradictions, on principal and secondary contradictions, the principal and secondary aspects of contradictions, the ever dynamic struggle and unity of opposites can help guard against absolutist, rigid thinking that is enemy of strategy. In broad stroke, it would help us understand that nothing is absolutely right or absolutely wrong and why America and its policy cannot be absolutely bad or absolutely good, why China can be a threat and opportunity at the same time, and why even the Duterte regime is also a unity of opposites.

Duterte's decision on VFA may well mark a new stage in the long history of Philippine-US relations. Ever since we lost in the Filipino-American war and through various historical periods from Commonwealth through Independence and until today, America has always been the dominant external influence in our foreign policy. This has brought advantages and disadvantages, even if there will always be debate as to which aspect outweighs the other. What's important is that in the continuous struggle of opposites in Philippine-US relations, we are entering the stage in which the old relationship is giving way to the new, which is somehow inevitable because the world is constantly in motion, the global balance of power is always shifting, and our awareness of what's our best options, what's in our best interests as a sovereign nation, will need to keep up with the major changes, especially in our neighborhood. A major factor in this change is the rise of China and the emerging rivalry between the United States and China.

In broad terms, the Duterte presidency and its foreign policy initiatives are a product of this process of change. Early on, he declared his determination and took initial steps to redress the historically lopsided and excessive dependency of the Philippines on the American world-view and policy. The VFA decision is certainly the latest and boldest signal of his determination to, in his view, assert Philippine sovereignty and lessen the US ability to dictate on Philippine security and foreign policies.

There are already so much analyses out there warning of dire consequences. Our friend Jay Batongbacal sees a "historic disruption of American power projection in the Asia-Pacific" with the danger that the Philippines and the region will be delivered to the "tender mercies" of China. Noting that the US is the only ally we can hope to deter China, retired Supreme Court Justice Antonio Carpio has warned that the President has decided to terminate VFA "knowing it would make the Mutual Defense Treaty and EDCA useless", while former Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario rejected the notion that "Philippine-US alliance is subservience to the US". Australian scholar Carl Thayer speaks of a "negative if not shattering impact on regional security in Southeast Asia" at a time of "China's massive militarization in the South China Sea", while US scholar Gregory Poling has cited "a deadly strike to the US-Philippines 'Iron Clad Alliance'." Even Chinese scholars see the move as "impairing America's Indo-Pacific strategy" which will "affect the situation in the South China Sea", though they don't accept that Manila will necessarily "gravitate towards Beijing".

On this issue, I am more inclined to defer to Ambassador Babes Romualdez's judgement that the VFA's termination is not the end of the world for Philippine-US relations. In his speech to the

Philippine Council for Foreign Relations of which I am a new member, he stressed his support for President Duterte's position that national sovereignty is a most important bottom line, but added that the US and Philippines need to find a solution to the issue that is "acceptable to both sides". He followed this up last Friday by indicating that he is working with his counterpart Ambassador Sung Kim on the possibility of using visiting forces agreements with Japan and Australia as a template for a new arrangement with the US. Philippine-US relations is certainly going through unprecedented change, whether the other important military agreements will be terminated or not remains to be seen, but we can expect that the relations will eventually find a new equilibrium, which will surely reflect the continuing great importance of our relations with the United States.

Nonetheless, as regards the serious warnings and criticisms of the VFA termination, it is very important to listen to these voices and not reject them outright. In fact, for our diplomacy and negotiation strategy, these negative voices have positive role, the more criticisms, especially of China's excessive claims in the South China Sea for example, the better, because they help to make China understand the complex, contending domestic factors and political costs and risks we have to deal with as we try to enhance our cooperation with China. Cooperation with China won't be sustainable without a national consensus supporting it, that doesn't end with the change of administration, and thus, it is in China's interests as well as ours that critical voices be fully heard and debated. Ultimately, it will be a mark of our political maturity and stability, if our foreign policy, that defines the main principles of our relations with the great powers like China, the United States and others, enjoys multi-partisan support. The VFA decision could well help the opening towards such a possibility.

The key to dealing with China lies in comprehending what has been referred to as its core interests. Scholars have made differing enumerations of these core interests but they can be summed as the three core interests of sovereignty, security and development interests. These interests are interrelated and yet distinct from each other and can contend with each other. Sovereignty includes territorial integrity which involves the issues of Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and maritime rights and interests that include issues of the South China Sea. Development interests refer to China's right to economic development, which can involve issues of stable economic growth, technology, and trade war. Security refers to the political security and stability of China's social system under the Communist Party leadership, the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The most important of these three core interests is regime security, the security of the Communist Party rule; if, under certain circumstances, there will be conflict or contradiction between these interests, then in general, the interests of political security will prevail.

Soon after President Duterte came to power, he signaled a fundamental shift in policy towards China, that, while upholding the country's maritime claims including the international arbitration ruling, abandoned the previous strategy of putting the South China Sea disputes in the front and center of relations with China. By pragmatically avoiding confrontation and compartmentalizing relations, cooperating where we can cooperate and dealing with disputes through peaceful, diplomatic negotiations, Duterte has brought about a sea-change in relations, resulting in major boosts in trade, economic aid and investments, tourism and other areas of cooperation. A bilateral mechanism has been launched to deal with the maritime issues, step by step, with the

current focus on fishing rights and possible joint exploration and development of maritime resources.

For China, the most important benefit from Duterte's policy shift was the dramatic easing of tensions in the South China Sea, which in turn has improved the regional security environment and eased the security threat facing the Communist Party. Duterte's recent decision to terminate the VFA will be seen in China as significantly disrupting the ability of the United States to use the Philippines as a base to pressure and threaten China, thus further improving China's security environment. More fundamentally, depending on further developments, it will be seen as the decisive rupture of the security alliance where the Philippines was long seen as an agency serving America's geo-strategic interests.

Given the decisive position of security in China's hierarchy of core interests, given China's record in resolving border issues with 14 neighboring countries which involved, according to some accounts, territorial concessions by China in exchange for greater security, given that the Philippines will eventually cease to be seen as instrument of any US military designs on China, I argue that, conceptually, it is possible to leverage the VFA decision in order to improve and strengthen the Philippine negotiating position vis-à-vis China, leading eventually, after a long and protracted process of negotiation, to solutions to maritime disputes in our favor.

I argue that weakness can turn into strength. With the VFA termination, we seem to weaken the military alliance and security umbrella that the United States provides. By weakening ourselves-- at least temporarily as we begin to build a more self-reliant military—we actually strengthen our ability to manage the South China Sea disputes in the direction that pushes China, for its own self-interests, to further consider and concede to our claims and demands.

I argue that what we consider as the bad policies of China, its aggressive and excessive claims in the South China Sea, can actually turn into a good thing, under the right conditions and with the right strategy on our part. The threat that China poses can actually turn into an opportunity that serves our national interests. Thanks to our geographic location and the South China Sea disputes, we have the chance to closely engage China, the world's second biggest economy that will eventually become number one, in a relationship that, on the basis of mutual help and mutual benefit, can accelerate our own rise as a strong and prosperous and respected country in Asia. That chance won't exist if we were located in the Antarctica, for example.

In other words, it's not enough to know and shout that China is bad. We must act in order to turn China into a good thing. It is not enough to complain that China is not respecting us. We must act to make China respect us. And this is only possible if, in the words of a master of strategy, "we know ourselves and know our enemy". Understanding China, its strengths and weaknesses, and understanding ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, is the starting point of a correct strategy for dealing with China.

Ultimately, the basis of my confidence that we can engage China in a long-term mutually beneficial relationship, that upholds our national interests, including our sovereignty and maritime entitlements under the international arbitral ruling, is based on my understanding of China's strategy for building socialism with Chinese characteristic. That strategy is bound to fail

if it is not coupled with the strategy of seeking peaceful development or peaceful rise on the global stage. Currently China is faced with the escalating US threats of containment, trade war, technological blockade and decoupling, on top of US pressures over Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea. Under these circumstances, a good relationship with the Philippines, with our strategic location, is critical for China. But that good relationship won't be possible if we ourselves are perceived to be a source of threat to China. By removing the source of such perception and pursuing an independent foreign policy, we will have more flexibility for engaging China in relationships that will enhance its own sense of security, which in return, can also enhance our own sense of security. It will then be up to our diplomats and experts to convert such security dividends into economic and other concrete dividends that will benefit our nation and our people.

Therefore, in the context of our geography, social system, political history and economic interests and the current stage of world development, a fundamental rebalancing of our relations with both the United States and China, which will enable us to maximize the benefits of good relations with both while avoiding being used by one against the other in their escalating rivalry, will be the sine qua non of our independent foreign policy. The VFA termination could well be the decisive start of the process leading to that goal.

Of course, what exactly lies ahead remains a big question mark. What twists and turns, and what challenges we will encounter, no one can say for sure. Professor Bobby Tuazon here has noted and I quote that President Duterte "has not shown any clear blueprint on what to do with the other defense pacts, let alone a strategic chart toward an independent foreign policy." In a way, the blanks can be considered as invitation for all of us to contribute ideas so that the work of building an independent foreign policy architecture will not be the lonely job of the President but become a national effort, and contribute to a much needed national consensus.

In this regard, I saw that Lucio Blanco Pitlo III has pointed to four foreign policy models: the Cambodian model with its greater accommodation of China; the nonalignment model championed by Indonesia; the self-reliant model of Vietnam; and the option of engaging multiple security partners. It is certainly important to reference the experience of our Southeast Asian brothers, and learning from their strong and weak points, it is possible that we can build, in the not too distant future, our own new Philippine model of independent foreign policy.