The Philippines’ Policy in Facilitating the Obama Administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia

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The article examines the reasons behind the Aquino administration’s instantaneous support for the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia as the Philippines negotiated and signed a framework agreement on enhanced defense cooperation with the United States. This outright backing stems from President Aquino’s determination to counter China’s expansionism in the South China Sea. The 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off between the Philippines and China has validated the immediacy of this security arrangement which jibes with the U.S. strategic policy. In conclusion, the article contends that a small power like the Philippines—when confronted by an emergent and potentially expansionist power—is not necessarily helpless since it has foreign policy choices, as well as the power to chart its own destiny.

Keywords: alliance, U.S. defense policy, Philippine defense policy, Philippine-U.S. alliance, defense cooperation.

In November 2011, the Obama administration announced a strategic pivot to Asia. This move entails a gradual shift from the current U.S. campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan to a deeper diplomatic and military involvement in the Asia-Pacific region. It is an obvious attempt to assert America’s leadership in Asia and to counterbalance China’s pervasive regional influence. It also implies a substantial reorientation of U.S. global strategy from the post-9/11 focus on the War on Terror to a rebalancing of American effort, and resources to meet the challenges and to seize opportunities in East Asia. Clearly, the United States is poised to ensure stability in Asia, protect its allies, and strategically balance, if not confront head-on, an assertive China.

Skeptics, however, argued that the U.S. strategic pivot to Asia is bound to fail for two reasons: First, it is a heavy-handed policy that unnecessarily antagonizes China and heightens tension in the region. Second, it is empty rhetoric, considering that American military presence will be hampered by budget cuts in U.S. government spending. In much the same way, analysts call the strategy “a twenty-first century form of containment that can revive Sino-U.S. rivalry.” They also doubt the Obama administration’s capacity to finance larger forward-deployed forces in the Asia-
Pacific region. The US$500 billion cut in U.S. defense budget will reduce the sizes of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy, respectively, and slow down the deployment of more planes and ships to the Pacific. Many analysts also view the move simply as a marketing job by the Obama administration to camouflage the decline of the United States after the 2008 financial meltdown, in sharp contrast to China’s unstoppable emergence as a great power in East Asia.

The Philippines is oblivious to these writings on the wall. It continues to pursue closer security cooperation with the United States as a matter of policy. This can be traced back to 2011 when President Aquino challenged China’s expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea. He redirected the focus of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) from domestic security to territorial defense, promoted closer Philippine-U.S. security relations; acquired American military equipment; and sought an unequivocal security guarantee from Washington under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). In late April 2014, the two allies signed the framework agreement on the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The agreement provides American forces strategic rotational presence in Philippine territory. In effect, it allows American forward-deployed forces in East Asia the most extensive access to Philippine military facilities since the United States vacated its vast air and naval installations at Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base in the early 1990s. Thus, the signing of the agreement on April 28, 2014 became the centerpiece of President Obama’s long-postponed Asian trip, a high-profile way of demonstrating American strategic clout in the region. The agreement was also designed to constrain China, which has stepped up its expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea by engaging the Philippines in a tense two-month naval stand-off near the Scarborough Shoal in 2012.

This article examines the factors behind the Aquino administration’s instantaneous support for the Obama administration’s rebalancing to Asia as it negotiated and signed a framework agreement on enhanced defense cooperation with the United States. It raises two corollary questions: What is the motive of the Philippine government in negotiating for an EDCA with the United States? How does this agreement facilitate the U.S. strategic pivot to Asia? The article also explores these pertinent questions: a) What is the Obama administration’s current military and diplomatic strategy in Asia? b) What is its origin? c) Why is the Philippines willing to facilitate this pivot? d) What is the framework agreement on increased U.S. rotational troop presence in the Philippines and how will it support the pivot strategy? And e) how will this framework agreement affect twenty-first century Philippine-U.S. security relations?

Alliances and Small Powers’ Balancing Policy

In his 1987 classic work on alliance formation, Stephen Walt observed that when confronted by a major external security challenge, a state may either balance by allying itself with other states against the potential threat, or it may get on the bandwagon by aligning itself with the emergent power. For a balancing policy to succeed, a state must have the essential military power, a demographic advantage, and a strong technological/industrial base. Generally, small powers have scarce natural resources, constrained geography, small population, diverse ethnic composition, and, in many