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## THE GEOSTRATEGIC RETURN OF THE PHILIPPINES

By Jim Thomas and Harry Foster

As the Obama administration executes its strategic “pivot” to the Western Pacific in the face of China’s military buildup, it is rediscovering the importance of a long-standing ally in the region. Like Gibraltar half a world away, the Philippines lie at a vital maritime crossroads through which passes more than half of the world’s shipping tonnage and 80 percent of crude oil shipments headed to Japan and South Korea.

The strategic importance of this archipelago nation is enduring. Over a century ago, the famed US naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan extolled the importance of the Philippines’ “narrow seas.” For much of the twentieth century, it played a central role in US strategy as a key logistics node for American air and naval forces and the geostrategic linchpin between East and Southeast Asia.

Following the Cold War, however, a series of diplomatic missteps saw the U.S. withdraw its forces from the Philippines, to the misfortune of both countries. The Americans have become overly dependent on Okinawa and Guam for basing, putting more and more military “eggs” in these two increasingly vulnerable basing “baskets.” The Filipinos find China moving to fill the security vacuum that occurred with the departure of the U.S. military presence. Of particular concern to Manila is Beijing’s aggressive actions in the resource-rich South China Sea, which lies immediately to the west of the Philippines.

China has ominously claimed nearly the entire South China Sea as a “core interest,” as with Taiwan. Recently, Chinese Major General Luo Yan warned the Philippine government that it faced a “last chance” to resolve disputes over economic claims in the South China Sea. For the Philippines, General Yan’s remarks were a stark reminder of just how difficult it is for a small country to live in the shadow of a rising power.

China’s claims are backed by its rapidly growing military power. Its People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is building up so-called “anti-access / area denial” military capabilities to hamper the ability of US military forces to operate in the East and South China Seas. Beijing appears intent on establishing a regional sphere of influence, supplanting the US military in the region, and “Finlandizing” its weaker neighbors like the Philippines. Consistent with these aims, China is also developing naval forces to project power throughout the region,

including aircraft carriers, guided-missile destroyers, satellite tracking ships, and nuclear-powered submarines, that could backstop militarily its demands.

Neutralizing the Philippines appears to be a critical element of China's strategic design. If China could force the Philippines to accommodate its claims over the South China Sea, it would greatly strengthen its hand vis-à-vis other claimants like Vietnam and Malaysia. Beijing would be able to gain through coercion what it could not through negotiation. Such an outcome would undermine the peace and prosperity that has characterized the region since the Cold War's end, to the benefit of all its inhabitants. Realizing this, a growing number of countries in the region are looking to Washington to continue underwriting regional stability. For the US and its allies, the Philippines represent a natural barrier to check Chinese naval expansion.

Given their growing mutual interests, the time is right to intensify defense relations between Manila and Washington. The upcoming ministerial-level talks in Washington later this week provide the opportunity to do just that.

Several issues should dominate the agenda. In the near-term the focus should be on how the US can help the Philippines defend itself and monitor activities within its South China Sea maritime exclusive economic zone. This is no easy task as the Philippine military remains weak, lacking either a modern air force or a capable navy. Neither are a match for increasingly capable Chinese ships and submarines. The United States needs to help the Philippines develop its own set of "anti-access/area denial" capabilities to counter China's growing power projection capabilities.

Emphasis should be on providing defensive systems like maritime surveillance aircraft, coastal anti-ship defenses, and air defense systems. The United States should consider providing its ally with excess military capabilities like Predator unmanned aircraft and naval patrol craft. Working with key allies like Japan and Australia, the United States should also establish a multinational investment fund to improve essential dual-use ports and airfields that are critical for the Philippines economic development and for enhancing its defense posture.

Manila and Washington should also consider more routine deployments of US forces to the Philippines to signal America's continuing security commitment to the Philippines. In particular the two allies should rebuild the old air bridge linking northeast and southeast Asia. The US Air Force could routinely fly aerial refueling and transport aircraft through airbases in the Philippines, while US submarines and maritime patrol aircraft operate in and out of Philippines' port facilities. The US Army and Marine Corps could also play critical roles, providing assistance to improve the Philippines' land-based surveillance network and coastal defense systems, while continuing to train Filipino internal defense forces.

It would be difficult to overestimate what is at stake in America's relationship with the Philippines. Accommodation by the Philippines to China's increasing diplomatic pressure and military intimidation would signal the waning of US power in Asia. It would grant China the ability to control the whole of the South China Sea as well as the strategic Luzon Strait, making it very difficult for the US to navigate or counter moves against other allies and partners in the region. Preventing this future begins by ensuring the Philippines has the tools, partners, and respect to defend its sovereign economic interests.

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