

Rethinking Philippine Foreign Policy*

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The international environment has greatly changed in the last few years, and the impact of these changes on our national life is just beginning to seep into the popular consciousness. Through mass media, we see everyday the effects of the collapse of socialism, the decline of ideology and the rise of geo-economics, conflicts of ethnicity and nationality, an information revolution, and the globalization of an increasingly borderless world.

Much has been written about these developments, as well as the emerging new global order (or disorder) that they may represent, and it is not for this paper to discuss them anew. Rather, this brief piece considers how some of these changes provide new and complex conditions for our country and people in the long and difficult struggle for a free and democratic, prosperous, and secure existence. It looks at the challenges presently confronting the conduct of our foreign

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relations, which is understood herein as the process that mediates our national aspirations and interests on the one hand, and the fluid external environment on the other.

The End of Bipolarism

Since the end of the Cold War, many of the premises previously underlying Philippine foreign policy have been invalidated. The thawing of the Cold War brought to the fore new developments and variables that need to be examined in the formulation of our foreign policy agenda. Foremost of these developments is the end of bipolarism and the sharp ideological division between 'East' and 'West'.

In the bipolar era, the Philippines staunchly identified itself with the anti-communist camp and allowed its alliance with the United States to fundamentally shape the objectives and limits of our external relations.**

Whether in politico-security issues, economic and development cooperation or cultural exchange, we looked to the United States, Japan, and Western Europe as our key partners and major influences. We were not the only country to do so, but there were nagging questions as to how ably we articulated the fundamental interests and concerns of our people in our relations with these countries, given our need to align with them in the context of bipolar international relations. Even in our participation in international organizations, we did not always reflect priorities that rightly belonged to a poor, heavily indebted developing country, despite our frequent assertions of a development-oriented diplomacy.

Today the East and West dichotomy is no more, and the US-Japan-Western European coalition faces serious challenges

**While it has been argued that our early establishment of relations with socialist states and with developing countries demonstrated a measure of pragmatism and independence even then, this did not represent a genuine opening up of our worldview. Our government and elites remained hostile and suspicious towards the socialist countries, at times resisting or regulating even the most innocuous of trade or people-to-people contacts. To the rest of the Third World, we remained almost indifferent.

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to its unity. While the US has become the world's sole superpower, it is one that is much weaker in terms of overall political and economic influence than in the past. Moreover, it is much more inward-looking, a natural consequence of its having lost the principal justification for many of its external adventures, following the Soviet collapse. In our region, a scaling down of US military presence took place not only as a consequence of changes in US military strategy and as a response to domestic US pressures to concentrate resources on the ailing American economy, but also as the result of a bold and historic decision made by the Philippine

Senate and a sovereign Filipino people to close down major US military bases on Philippine soil.

Relations With the United States

Despite the decline of US military influence in the region, the Philippines, along with the rest of East Asia, continues to have important interests in its relations with the United States, both in economic and politico-security terms. For one, our trade and investment dependence on the US requires continued bilateral relations and for another, a common stake in preventing the emergence of a new regional hegemon or dominant power. This relationship, however, has ceased to be the fulcrum of our relations with the outside world. It cannot be denied that we, together with many developing countries, have been emancipated from the confines of bipolar, Cold War-denominated international relations.

The relationship of the United States with East Asia has in fact undergone important changes, with the strategic US-Japan-

China anti-Soviet security collaboration supported by ASEAN giving way to sharp US-Japan economic competition, increasing US-China contention, and serious US-ASEAN policy differences. In the post-Cold War era, US policy in East Asia has become quite enigmatic. It is foolish to continue to rely on the United States to provide security and economic assistance to a region that is enjoying higher growth rates than itself, and to one that disagrees so often and so openly with US objectives.

For the Philippines, after a rude awakening to the harsh realization that there never was a special relationship with the United States after all, the challenge is to craft new terms of relations based on mutual benefit and respect for sovereign interests and grounded on new complex realities of the emerging multipolar world order. Furthermore, the challenge is to anchor these new relations on the achievement of self-respect and self-determination.

Our Asian Destiny

Another development that bears greatly on our interests is the surge of political, economic, commercial, and functional linkages across the Asia-Pacific and, as part of this phenomenon, the expanding role of Southeast Asia.

Among Asian states, disputes continue to exist over land and maritime boundaries, refugee flows and migration, and other issues. Differences abound in culture, religion, political and social systems, levels of economic development, and national attitudes toward the outside world. Yet integration is taking place through increases in intra-Asian trade and investment, cooperation and consensus-building in the

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ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), labor migration flows, exchanges in information, science and technology, and subregional economic synthesis schemes such as the Chinese Economic Area, Singapore-Johor-Riau growth triangle, the East ASEAN Growth Area (EAGA), among others.

Moreover, the ASEAN is expanding politically and organizationally to eventually include all ten Southeast Asian states as members. Vietnam has just become a full member. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Burma) are expected to follow suit. A ten-member ASEAN – an ASEAN 10 –

will be even more diverse culturally, economically, politically, and ideologically than it is now. It will be no easy task to achieve, a risky operation all told, but there are attractive long-term possibilities: (1) a Southeast Asia that in time may resolve most conflicts among its members without need for external intervention; (2) a united Southeast Asia that can be a formidable political force which will balance any undue influence that the United States, Japan, China or even a resurgent Russia might try to wield over the region; and above all, (3) a Southeast Asia that can take advantage of economic complementation schemes using the wealth of its natural and human resources to attain common, if not equal, economic prosperity.

The creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the most inclusive, high-level, official security dialogue framework ever to emerge in the Asia-Pacific, may also help realize a stable multipolar security environment in the region. Still in its infancy stage, the ARF is presently a talking shop designed for preventive

diplomacy, but when handled properly, it may gradually evolve into a forum for conflict resolution. The ASEAN is also building bridges to Europe. The Asia-Europe meeting it will convene next year hopes to do for East Asian-European economic relations what the APEC will be doing for Asian-North American economic relations.

In the post-Cold War, post-US bases era, the Philippines has rediscovered that its destiny lies with Asia. Our relationships with Malaysia, Indonesia, and the rest of ASEAN, as well as with Vietnam, Japan, China, and Taiwan, have grown in importance to us over these last few years. They have become or may soon join the ranks of our principal trading partners, investors, labor markets, and partners in security, economic, and functional cooperation. At the same time, they are our actual or potential competitors and adversaries, many of whom are leapfrogging into industrialized status while we still tend to plod through.

In the light of this rediscovery, what priorities and objectives shall we pursue in our growing relations with the rest of Asia? How do we exploit our competitive advantages while fully utilizing the benefits of complementation? Since more contacts will inevitably mean greater incidence of conflicts with our neighbors, how do we manage to promote our national interests without prejudicing the common interests we have? Conversely, how do we contribute to ASEAN solidarity and efficacy without sacrificing national sovereignty, our distinct democratic identity or the prestige and dignity of our people? Our recent conflicts with Indonesia regarding the holding

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of a conference on East Timor in the country, with Singapore regarding the handling of the Flor Contemplacion affair, and with Malaysia over its immigration authorities' treatment of our nationals must be evaluated in such a framework.

The Emergence of China

The emergence of China as an economic powerhouse also presents new questions for Philippine foreign policy. In the last fifteen years or so, China transformed itself from a closed and backward communist society into a seemingly unstoppable economic dynamo. Its market reforms and economic liberalization policies have made it the world's third largest and fastest growing economy, the eleventh largest trading nation, and potentially the world's most attractive market with its 1.2 billion population.

There is some agreement among analysts that whatever happens inside China is bound to affect the rest of the region, if not the world. China's growth is profitable for companies of Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Hongkong, and other countries which have positioned their investments wisely and have undertaken successful product marketing strategies in the mainland, the Philippines excluded. On the one hand, the immense economic opportunities presented by China are expected to serve as a catalyst not only to an Asian economic boom, but also to the sluggish Japanese, US, and Western European economies. On the other, the collapse of China into a prolonged political turmoil will almost certainly lead, as in centuries past, to a massive exodus of refugees and migrants, which, in turn, will be a veritable nightmare for their likely destinations of North America, Japan, and Southeast Asia, including the Philippines.

China's economic strength has also resulted in its increasing assertiveness in the international arena. Some indications of this are its policy to continue nuclear testing, its refusal to give in to Western pressure on human rights and democracy, and its intractable pursuit of expansive sovereignty claims, especially *vis-a-vis* Taiwan and in regard to the South China Sea.

The main questions concerning China which is of interest to the region and to us, particularly now that we have become embroiled in more direct conflict with China over Mischief Reef and the Kalayaan Islands, are: what role will China play in the security of the region? Will it strive to become a dominant power, using its newfound economic clout to expand its political and military influence over its smaller and weaker neighbors? China is, after all, presently engaged in an ambitious military modernization program. Or will it be a benign power, forced by pragmatic economic interests to pursue a cooperative and pacifist foreign policy toward the region? Everyone is hoping for the latter, but many are uncertain if present conditions will push China firmly onto this path.

In either case, we must define our national interest as the pursuit of a regional environment where China enjoys a measure of respect as a sovereign nation with many great achievements, but one where it does not become a destabilizing or hegemonic power hostile to us or other neighbors. The US experience with China may be instructive for us: past attempts to isolate or 'contain' China have proven less effective than efforts to influence it through constructive engagement. In the era of regional geo-economics, playing balance-of-power games may be less useful

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than striving to achieve a balance, or mutual recognition, of legitimate interests.

The Social Development Agenda

While our traditional diplomacy has given much attention to political and security issues and to the promotion of national economic interests, we have yet to focus our energies on other matters that may be of even more vital concern to our people. The most basic struggles against poverty, disease, ignorance, prejudice, whether ethnic-, gender- or class-based are losing battles as far as the majority of our people are concerned.

The international community has also scored very limited success in this area, and the flurry of post-Cold War activity in political, security, and economic affairs is not matched by a similar commitment of effort and resources to food distribution, improvement of health and education programs, and the establishment of a secure social environment for the millions of refugees and migrants scattered the world over.

Whether in the rural areas, urban slums, or overseas where huge itinerant Filipino populations live, Filipinos are still only marginally affected or aided by what our governments have been accomplishing in our foreign relations. After decades of receiving official development assistance and negotiating bigger and better loans from foreign sources, we have yet to see significant improvements in the basic conditions of our people. This should be a primary concern in the future conduct of our bilateral relations and in our activities in multilateral and international fora.

There are other trends and developments looming on the horizon which also require rethinking of our foreign policies, and it is best for us to try to anticipate them. The move toward 'normalization' of Japan, which shall take place only if the rest of the region allows it to play a politico-security role, is one. The rise of national and international non-governmental organizations as major foreign policy actors is another. The challenges are multitude, as are the opportunities, for we do live in interesting times, requiring the most innovative solutions to age-old problems.