

*Reflections from Scholars and Practitioners*

# **Implications of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Administration of Philippine Diplomacy**

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*The COVID-19 pandemic is widely recognized as one of the most important challenges that humanity currently faces. It has had a greater disruptive effect on the world than recent wars and has caused greater social disruption than most upheavals in the modern age with the continuing effects of the pandemic threatening the established order of global governance and international relations. These challenges make clear that Philippine foreign policy is at a crossroads. This article examines the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the administration of Philippine diplomacy. It discusses the economic and political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion zooms in to how the pandemic affects the foreign service sector. The article concludes with some implications for the administration of Philippine diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** *Philippines, diplomacy, public administration, COVID-19 implications*

The COVID-19 pandemic is widely recognized as one of the most important challenges that humanity currently faces. It has had a greater disruptive effect on the world than recent wars. The continued effects of the global economic and financial crisis of more than a decade ago, combined with the waves of natural disasters linked to climate change, further underscored the need for building resilience across the board. These challenges make clear to the Philippine government that it stands at a crossroads, particularly in terms of its foreign policy. The current foreign policy path may be comfortable because it is familiar. Yet, given recent global trends and developments, it minimizes the probability of the country emerging stronger from the pandemic. This article examines the implications of the COVID-19<sup>1</sup> pandemic on the administration of Philippine diplomacy. It discusses the economic and political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the foreign service sector. The article concludes with some implications for the administration of Philippine diplomacy.

## **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Economic Consequences**

The COVID-19 pandemic is still underway, and understanding its effects can be compared to studying an iceberg: some things are obvious, but much more lies unseen beneath the surface. One of the things that we do know is that the COVID iceberg is big. The economic consequences alone are daunting.

The initial supply-side impact to global outputs has now been exacerbated by the demand-side shock as millions around the world lose their main sources of income. Estimates about how much has been spent globally to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic reflects the ongoing nature of the crisis. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, has estimated the global amount to a staggering USD 12 trillion and growing.<sup>2</sup> It is generally agreed that what has been spent so far will not avoid a contraction, with the hope that measures will contain the damage to a recession, avoiding an economic depression.

In developing countries, the majority of their populations do not have the social safety nets and other infrastructure needed to protect their most vulnerable. As they struggle to contain the public health emergency, developing countries also endeavor to minimize the economic and social dislocations resulting from the crisis and the Great Shutdown.<sup>3</sup> This problem has generated increased fiscal strains for many and the limited fiscal space that they face consequently raises the prospect of a new debt crisis.

As if the prospect of a debt crisis was not bad enough, many sectors of the economy may not have the ability to recover, particularly those that rely on the movement of people and personal contact. These sectors include tourism and travel, as well as the hospitality and food services industries. A further cause for concern is that many of these sectors are important or increasingly important for developing economies. In the Philippines, the erosion of the consumption base combined with the potential losses in remittances are especially worrying. These economic dangers have inspired some countries to turn further inward, erecting barriers to trade and attempting to decouple their economies from others. Paradoxically, the open and interdependent world that helped many countries in their path to development, along with the multilateral institutions that embody it, is suddenly no longer relevant.

This situation is perhaps unsurprising. Research by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on some of the specifics makes for grim reading. Trade experienced a significant drop, from 7% to 9% compared to 2019. The World Trade Organization (WTO) is slightly less optimistic in their trade estimates, indicating that the fall in world trade will be at least 9.2% in

2020. UNCTAD estimates on investment are equally grim: global foreign direct investment (FDI) flows will decrease 49% percent in 2020, from their 2019 value of USD1.54 trillion. In addition, FDI is projected to decrease by a further 5% to 10% in 2021 with recovery only expected to start in 2022. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), already lagging far behind schedule in their implementation, are now further in question.

### **Political Impact**

In bringing our world to a sudden stop, the COVID-19 pandemic made that most important ingredient for diplomacy—personal contact—a rare commodity. Normalcy has been redefined in terms of distancing and isolation. Existing systemic strains around the world have become more acute, and the already precarious state of the multilateral system has become more complicated and unpredictable. As countries confront the pandemic and seek to protect their own from the worst, the solidarity that has marked the best of multilateralism has come under increasing pressure.

Many noticed, for example, how one country has paralyzed the Appellate Body of the WTO, dealing a severe blow to the multilateral trading system. This erosion of the political will of one of the key players and guarantors of the current system has accelerated the crisis in multilateralism and has resulted in some major international gatherings concluding without tangible outcomes and the withdrawal of major countries from international bodies. Most worryingly, we see a rise in unilateral actions with little or no regard for international mechanisms and commitments.

These failures, even before COVID, are the symptoms of a broader and underlying lack of political will to tackle the big questions of our time in a transparent and inclusive manner. This has aggravated the specter of trade wars and has hampered much-needed international cooperation in crucial areas such as alleviating climate change impacts and addressing the migration crisis. Indeed, this trend also risks further eroding the stability and security prospects around the globe, including the West Philippine Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The erosion of multilateral cooperation may, in turn, magnify the threats from terrorism and cyberattacks, among others.

Further complicating an already confusing panorama is the rise of authoritarianism and populism, forces that have brought the world to the brink time and again in the last century. These events have weakened international cooperation and the tentative progress made in advancing regional integration across the globe. Brexit is a clear example, compounded by the less than stellar collective global response to the COVID crisis.

### **Implications for Philippine Diplomacy: Policy Considerations**

If the Philippines is to weather COVID, it will need to summon its reserves of courage and vision to take a leadership role and guide the subsequent world order towards a direction that will be beneficial for its interests. This calls for leadership of ideas and of action. In particular, the Philippines needs to address three interrelated policy dimensions.

#### **Intellectual Leadership in Promoting a Global Economic System Conducive to Philippine Interests**

The first policy dimension that the Philippines needs to address is to actively exercise intellectual leadership in promoting a global economic system that will help advance Philippine national development while maintaining economic security. The Philippines should continue to advocate for a global system that promotes greater fairness and equity. But navigating the treacherous global waters of diplomacy should be based on the pragmatic recognition and pursuit of real geopolitical interests, unhindered by the ideological and historical rifts that have distorted the global discourse on development.

An agenda for post-COVID multilateral policy in the Philippines should therefore include assuring meaningful access to trade, securing value chains for strategic supplies and commodities including food, meaningful participation in international economic decision making and rule-making, and recognizing the long-neglected nexus between international peace and security and development. This agenda calls for actively engaging in various multilateral mechanisms to revitalize key institutions and processes. Specifically, the Philippines should exercise intellectual and political leadership so that its interests on issues such as trade, debt, investment, technology transfer, climate change, and migration are adequately addressed in the various outcomes of multilateral conferences and processes.

#### **Advancing the National Interest through Pragmatic Multilateralism**

Exercising intellectual leadership implies a second consideration—proactively using the levers and structures of multilateralism to translate into action the strategic objectives of the country by playing an active leadership role in the various multilateral institutions as well as blocs of countries. This means being more assertive about the right of the Philippines to lead. It must be disconcerting to find that the Philippines, the 12<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world in terms of population, does not have a seat at the G-20, while smaller countries do. In the post-COVID-19 world, there is no room for an implied historic and inherited role for only some countries to lead and others to follow.

The Philippines needs to leverage and rejuvenate the Global South. Worsening economic realities among developing countries, diverging outlooks and philosophies, and the lack of unifying leadership have eroded the influence and impact of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G-77)<sup>4</sup> in recent years, to the point that in some crucial negotiations, such as climate change, developing countries speak not with one, but multiple voices.

The post-COVID reality presents an opportunity for the Philippines to take an important leadership role in the renewal of the Global South, enabling the country to build and lead the necessary coalitions to promote a global agenda that will advance its interests. These coalitions should result in a web of multilateral relationships and institutions that can help to constrain larger powers that may pose a challenge to Philippine interests. In doing so, coalitions with like-minded governments, both from the Global North and South, and other stakeholders should be built and nurtured in order to maximize effective action and impact.

### **Evolving International and Regional Security Arrangements**

This leads to the third consideration: using multilateralism to shape institutions, especially in the Philippines, to maximize peace, stability, and prosperity on its terms, influencing the geopolitical balance in the region. Philippine foreign policy, therefore, needs to be examined in generational terms. Many are frustrated by multilateralism because it does not yield instant gratification. Yet its rewards can be more lasting and meaningful. The key is in building relationships and interlocking interests to promote positive behavior and constrain negative actions and tendencies.

Recent events have demonstrated that there is no longer such a thing as guarantor of the global system. There really are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests. The Philippines' relative value to its friends and protectors depends on their understanding of their own interests. It is thus important for the Philippines to re-evaluate its strategic relationships and build the necessary structures that will minimize its dependency while maximizing its continued influence. However, it is likewise important not to create a geopolitical vacuum.

One way to re-evaluate and strengthen relationships with neighboring countries and other institutions is by promoting greater ASEAN integration. This includes establishing regional supply chains to better insulate the region from future shocks and maximize ASEAN's capacity for rapid response for its members when needed. The evolution of ASEAN as a regional economic bloc helps to diminish the gravitational pull of other players.

ASEAN also needs to be more effective as a political bloc, promoting collective peace and security. While, admittedly, the expected benefits from the adoption of the ASEAN charter have not been fully realized, regional and global realities suggest the need for exploring further regional integration.

Further integration should in turn lead to stronger ASEAN cooperation in multilateral forums, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC). The imperatives generated post COVID-19 for a more proactive foreign policy and regional and global leadership open up new opportunities. ASEAN member states will need to consider how the various regional structures can be strengthened, such as the ASEAN Secretariat, to enable it to play a similar role to those in the European Union (EU) or United Nations (UN), notwithstanding the needed reforms in these organizations. For the Philippines to play a key role in transformative leadership in the region, it needs to be conscious of its real place in the world and a public that demands the diplomacy needed to fulfill its national destiny. Philippine diplomacy, and the infrastructure that makes it possible, needs to be aligned towards this goal.

### **Implications for Philippine Diplomacy: Public Administration Considerations**

Philippine diplomacy in favor of the country's needs and interests requires addressing the resulting public administration implications,<sup>5</sup> specifically the people, culture, and intellectual base of the foreign service.<sup>6</sup> Formulating policies and initiatives needs to address pressing issues in each of these areas.

#### **The People**

An often-repeated observation is that a foreign service represents the best and brightest of its country. It implies that the diplomatic profession retains sufficient prestige and integrity to make the lifelong commitment worthwhile for the best and brightest candidates. Offering incentives and professional opportunities to attract and retain talent, such as career advancement, may help improve job satisfaction and public service motivation, maintaining the sense of mission that attracts people to public service.

In the last few decades, unfortunately, the prestige, direction and sense of mission of foreign service in the Philippines has declined, partly because of challenges prevalent in the civil service, but mainly because of mixed and often conflicting priorities. One of the clear indications of paradigm shift was the move from traditional diplomacy to the protection of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) catalyzed by the Flor Contemplacion case in the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup>

An increase in the number of political appointees to foreign service positions also led to the perceived decline of career advancement opportunities, particularly at the senior levels of the foreign service. Remuneration of members of the foreign service remains relatively low, although it has improved in recent years. Directly related to the issue of recruitment into the foreign service, and an important aspect in effective human resource development, is the question: what is the nature of a Philippine diplomat? Should diplomats be specialists or generalists? The prevailing paradigm in the Philippine foreign service is for its diplomats to be generalists.

The generalist approach has some clear advantages. Each officer is assumed to be interchangeable in terms of skills. Organizing large training activities on a broad subject for the staff also reduces the need to invest heavily in several clusters of specialized training. Moreover, guiding personnel along the same career escalator helps minimize the need to plan the development of individual officers with clear specializations. The approach makes human resource management simpler.

However, this approach undermines a key value of diplomats today—to provide context and understanding amid rapid information overload. Assuming that all foreign service officers are interchangeable also ignores the reality that different people have different temperaments and skill sets. For example, what makes a good and compassionate assistance-to-nationals officer is not necessarily what makes a good national security specialist, which often requires realism and dispassionate detachment.

### **Organizational Culture**

Strengthening the organizational culture of the foreign service is also an important consideration. In the case of the Philippine foreign service, institutional pride mitigated against the modest compensation received by Philippine diplomats compared with that received by their foreign counterparts. Institutional pride shaped a sense of responsibility that Philippine diplomats should hold themselves to a higher standard of conduct and achievement. Sadly, this sense seems to have diminished in recent years.

Organizational culture is an essential ingredient for establishing a more assertive and proactive post-COVID-19 Philippine diplomacy. Having a strong organizational culture redounds to the accomplishment of the mission and purpose of the foreign service sector. The intellectual and organizational infrastructure allowing socialization processes inherent in human resource management, such as training, needs to be put in place to guide and transmit a positive organizational culture.

## **Intellectual Base**

An important component of foreign service is its intellectual base. Establishing higher standards of conduct and performance promotes a culture of greater intellectual achievement. Currently, the foreign service mainly relies on conventional thinking and approaches, rather than on scholarship and out-of-the box thinking. A proactive and assertive foreign policy based on leadership of thought and ideas allows foreign service to implement initiatives.

With its current structures and approaches, the Philippine diplomacy is not optimally equipped in terms of training and experience to generate plans and programs that meet present and future needs. Building the requisite intellectual and analytical capacity in the foreign service helps better identify policy options and alternatives, but this exercise will require time. In the meantime, the foreign service needs to engage its key stakeholders to formulate and implement policies that the Philippines deserves and needs.

## **Making Philippine Diplomacy Fit for Purpose**

Bringing together the aforementioned considerations to make Philippine diplomacy fit for purpose will require a significant investment of political will and resources. It would help bridge the gap in domestic initiatives, such as the *Build Build Build Program*, where the governance infrastructure leaves more room for improvement. A pragmatic approach to making Philippine diplomacy more meaningful could begin with reforms in recruitment and human resource management, particularly by determining the foreign service sector's needs for specific skills and capacities. Various areas of specialization that may be considered in recruiting staff may include consular services or assistance to nationals, economic/trade, national security, and multilateral diplomacy, among others. Career paths clearly identifying attractive career opportunities within each specialization should be clearly charted. This strategy would help provide incentives for foreign service employees to choose their respective specializations. The approach would also help in designing more appropriate training initiatives as personnel advance through the ranks.

The foreign service sector may look to the career development and training of military officers as a model. Junior officers in the military typically receive basic skills and leadership training upon entry, as well as specialized training for officers to fulfill their mandated roles. As they progress in their military careers, the junior officers continue to receive mandatory training in their respective areas of specialization to enhance their effectiveness. Field-grade (mid-level) officers receive more advanced leadership and management training. Training of senior and flag ranks takes on a more strategic dimension.



Applying this analogy to the training arm of the foreign service, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), would mean shifting it from its current character as a course-delivery institution<sup>8</sup> to one more akin to a diplomatic staff and command college. To be truly an all-of-government institution, FSI should provide holistic and long-term foreign service training for all individuals engaged in foreign service work, including service attaches.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and FSI should also collaborate more closely to strengthen institutional culture and memory. One possible innovation would be to establish and adequately resource the position of Department Historian to maintain, promote, and help guide the evolution of Philippine diplomatic history. This could enrich the joint initiatives of DFA and FSI. Maintenance of archives and records in the DFA, which hold significant historical value, should also be improved. Systematizing the management of records and archives will improve institutional memory and strengthen organizational culture.

The interface of FSI with the DFA policy planning office also needs to be strengthened. The FSI's Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) conducts useful research and analysis. Closer interaction with the DFA policy planning office would facilitate the application of CIRSS's study findings in policy planning and implementation processes.

Foreign service personnel also need to continuously improve their intellectual skills by engaging in scholarly analytical work on Philippine foreign policy. Some foreign services require their diplomats to publish scholarly papers for promotion. Allowing foreign service personnel to undertake sabbatical work in academic institutions and policy think-tanks may help them contribute to scholarly work in foreign service policy. Collaboration with the academe, civil society, and the private sector may likewise help the foreign service field contribute to development across various fields.

Sharing of experience and knowledge can also be nurtured by encouraging foreign service personnel to train and serve in other government departments. This proposal could be far more useful in developing effective senior diplomats than, for example, the current system structured around the Career Minister examinations.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring a mix of new challenges while accelerating many changes that were already previously underway. The crisis highlights the need to transform the global system of governance and

international relations. In particular, the pandemic brings about important implications for Philippine foreign policy, requiring innovations both in the way that foreign policy is seen and implemented in the Philippines.

In turn, the policy implications mentioned earlier indicate the need for Philippine foreign service to respond to the current needs and aspirations of the Filipino people. To do so entails improving recruitment and training of Philippine diplomats, strengthening the organizational culture of the Philippine foreign service, and equipping state institutions with the infrastructure needed to implement foreign service reforms. These measures may contribute to the quality and assertiveness of Philippine diplomacy in a post-COVID world. However, the foreign service is a tool for development. For the tool to be effective, it must be wielded with both skill and wisdom by the nation's political leadership. This will take time and will span several administrations. Nonetheless, such leadership needs to recognize that, ultimately, the future of the foreign service and of Philippine diplomacy lies in the hands of the Filipino people.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations or the UN member states.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The article uses the terms COVID-19 and COVID interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Gaspar, V., Medas, P. Ralyea, J., & Ture, E. (2020, October 14). Fiscal policy for an unprecedented crisis. *IMFblog*. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/10/14/fiscal-policy-for-an-unprecedented-crisis/>

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as of the writing of this article in early November 2020, these economic downturns are increasingly looking more like "The Great Shutdowns."

<sup>4</sup> The NAM and G-77 are the blocs that represent developing countries in the UN. The NAM represents developing countries on political matters, while the G-77 on economic matters.

<sup>5</sup> There are many other considerations, including the need to address the revitalization of the administration of diplomacy with broader reform of the civil service (which is clearly beyond the scope of this article).

<sup>6</sup> While "foreign service" usually refers to the personnel of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) assigned overseas, in this paper it shall refer more broadly to the "country team," namely the officers of the DFA and the various attached agencies assigned overseas.

<sup>7</sup> Flor Contemplacion was an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) convicted of murdering another OFW, Delia Maga, and Nicholas Huang, the son of Maga's employer, in May 1991 in Singapore. Contemplacion was found guilty by the Singaporean court, sentenced to death in January 1993, and executed by hanging on 17 March 1995. The case sparked both domestic and

international indignation over the apparent lack of due process and denial of legal rights that led to Contemplacion's execution. It offers a case for reexamining the competency of Philippine foreign service officials, particularly in providing legal assistance to OFWs.

<sup>8</sup> Most FSI courses are stand-alone in nature. This shift would require a more holistic vision of continuing training and human resource development.

<sup>9</sup> The Foreign Service Act, RA 7157, requires that eligible officers undergo an examination for promotion to the rank of Career Minister, i.e., into the ranks of the senior foreign service. The Career Ministers examination has been criticized for favoring officers who have been fortunate to have had a conventional "substantive" trajectory, to the detriment of those who have been involved more in areas such as consular and assistance-to-nationals work. One weakness of the examination is that it is not based on any significant career development or preparatory training.

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