Crisis in Philippine-U.S. Security Relations: Transforming the Philippine-U.S. Alliance to a Security Partnership?

Introduction

In December 2018, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana announced that the Department of National Defense (DND) wants to review the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the United States. Accordingly, since it is high-time for both sides to look into its provisions given the South China Sea dispute.
According to Secretary Lorenzana “Manila should review its defense agreement with Washington to clarify whether or not the United States will come to its aid (or assistance), as tension in the South China Sea is the Philippines’ “most difficult” security challenge.”
He added “We believe it's time to sit down with our U.S. counterparts and revisit the terms of our alliance. We are partners. We had deep historical ties. We must clearly define our roles and responsibilities when the need arises to be joined in arms.”
According to Secretary Lorenzana, the end goal of the review is either to maintain it, (or) strengthen it, or scrap it.”
Secretary Teodoro Locsin, however, argued that “it is pointless to review the MDT since here were no American military bases in the country anymore.”
On February 11, President Rodrigo Duterte directed Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin to formally notify the U.S. that he is terminating the VFA. As a result of this action, the termination of the VFA will take place 180 days or six months after the U.S. government had received the written notification.
A day earlier, on February 10, Philippine Senate President Vicente Sotto II and twelve senators filed Senate Resolution 312 requesting the president to reconsider his decision abrogating the VFA.
Introduction

The resolution cited Secretary Locsin’s arguments, during the Senate hearing, that the agreement is beneficial to the allies as it ensures the operability of Philippine-U.S. defense agreements and modalities of cooperation, and allows the U.S. to provide a total package approach in providing defense articles to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).
President Duterte, however, slammed the door for any measure to salvage the 20-year old agreement. Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo announced that “the President will not entertain any initiative coming from the U.S. government to salvage the VFA; neither will he accept any official invitation to visit the United States.”
By directing his foreign secretary to serve the notice on the above-mentioned date, President Duterte has effectively rendered these two security agreements as nothing but merely “pieces of papers” as the VFA is the implementing document (of these two security treaties).
In the light of the crisis in Philippine-U.S. security relations, this article explores an alternative security arrangement to the alliance, security partnership. This presentation raises the problem. Is a security partnership a viable alternative to the Philippine-U.S. alliance?
Alliance versus Security Partnership

I'm going out to forge an alliance.
Alliances are not the friendships of international relations, unless as Aristotle observed, we apply the word friendship to relationship based on utility.
Alliances cannot be disinterested nor can they be random relationship like friendship. The (utilitarian) purpose of any alliance is to enhance the security of allies, or to advance their mutual interests, against the outside world.
Alliances are formed with third parties in view.
Why are alliances formed?

"Alliances are against, and derivatively for someone or something. Alliances are formed and operated against any power that poses threat to the allies."

George Liska, 1962
“Alliance is a formal or an informal arrangement for security cooperation between two sovereign and independent states.”

— Stephen Walt, 1983
Alliances are formed when states pool their resources, abilities, and efforts in the face of a common threat.
Threats, in turn are a function of power, proximity, specific offensive capabilities, the expected response to an emerging threat, and the attempt to balance against it.
Allies pool their resources and in efforts in pursuit of their mutual interests. However, allies still exercise sovereign control over how these efforts and resources will be utilized during times of war.
Alliance versus Security Partnership

In an alliance, states explicitly or implicitly define the terms under which they combine their security efforts, resources, and residual rights, and decide when and how to use these common goods in war and in peace.
Often times, however, allies disagree on the conditions under which these joint efforts and resources will be utilized during both times of war and peace.
A security or strategic partnership is a relationship where partners strengthen their respective capabilities without any commitment to go to each other’s assistance in times of war.
Security or strategic partnerships are informal alliances or alignments or ententes through which countries engage in periodic meetings, joint exercises, and other limited security activities without entering into a formal military alliance.
Alliance versus Security Partnerships

These security partnerships are simple and partial alignments that are signaling devices of diplomatic support and means of reassurance.
However, security partners need not make any mutual pledge or commitments to come to each other’s rescue or participate in another’s conflict.
Thus, there is no need for them to pool their resources together since there is no formal commitment to assist each other during conflicts.
These are looser security relations that are designed to coordinate diplomatic positions on key security issues and allow a certain amount of security cooperation, especially in weapon and technology transfers.
Security partnerships are considered as soft, rather than hard form of balancing since it has a security component and is explicitly aimed at balancing the power or threatening behavior of another state but below the level of a formal treaty alliance.
States enter into security partnerships because they fear losing their autonomy and they are not willing to accept the cost that would be incurred by strengthening one’s relations to one great power over another.
The Philippine-U.S. Alliance at Work

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For the Philippines, America is the heavy lifter.”
The 1951 MDT has only eight articles and is Washington’s first mutual defense treaty in Asia. The MDT and the earlier 1947 Military Bases Agreement became the legal bases for U.S. military presence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia during the Cold War.
The Philippine-U.S. Alliance at Work: Issue of Effectivity

The MDT extends American security guarantee to the Philippines. The MDT, however, does not provide any automatic response from both sides.
The MDT obligates the allies to consult each other and determine what military or diplomatic action, if any, both would take.
U.S. officials have consistently assured their Filipino counter-parts and critics of the 1951 MDT that Washington would regard any attack on the Philippines and its public vessels as a casus foederis for implementing the treaty.
In the aftermath of the withdrawal of American forces from the Philippines in November 1992, both Manila and Washington decided to keep the MDT in force without any amendments.
Addressing the Alliance Security Dilemma: The Case of the Philippine-U.S. MDT
All alliances are afflicted by “the alliance security dilemma.” This refers to the allies’ constant fear of either abandonment and entrapment.
This dilemma can be managed by the constant flow of communication between allies expressing their intention to support and strengthen each other is the face of the common threat.
In November 2011, then Secretary Hilary Clinton on board the U.S.S. Fitzgerald announced that the U.S. would honor both its mutual defense treaty and its long-standing strategic alliance with the Philippines.
In April 2014, President Barack Obama declared that “Our commitment to defend the Philippines is ironclad and the United States will keep that commitment because allies never stand alone.”
In November 2015, President Obama, on board the *BRP Del Pilar*, announced: “We have a treaty obligation, an iron clad commitment to the defense of our ally, the Philippines. You can count on the U.S.”
During his recent visit to Manila, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo declared, “As the South China Sea is part of the Pacific; any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty.”
Addressing the Alliance Security Dilemma

U.S. officials, however, would never comment on what the United States would do if there is an armed attack on a Philippine ship or aircraft in the South China Sea.
In July 2011, Senator Jim Webb of Virginia asked the State Department to clarify U.S. Treaty commitment to the Philippines. The State Department, however, did not clarify the matter.
The U.S. State Department stops short of making any reference to any automatic response in an armed clash in South China Sea nor on its actual commitment in the case of an armed attack against the Philippines.
Addressing the Alliance Security Dilemma

When pressed to the issue, it gives a cryptic statement “China cannot simply assert that the events in the disputed in the South China are not of Washington’s business because it is a treaty ally of the Philippines.”
As a matter of policy, the U.S. tries its best to address legitimate Philippine concerns about the absence of a clear guarantee of military support in case of an armed confrontation in the South China Sea.
The U.S., however, also avoids giving an explicit and carte blanche security guarantee that could tempt the Philippines to act provocatively against China based on its broad interpretation of its sovereignty over the islands it controls in the South China Sea and on a mistaken assumption about the prospect of an “automatic American armed response” in case of an outbreak of armed hostilities in the disputed waters.
The South China Sea dispute is now one of the four active geopolitical flashpoints in East Asia at the time of a major systemic change in the region as the U.S.’ unipolar moment is strategically being challenged by two great regional powers—China and Russia.
The U.S. is concerned about a possible entrapment in any conflict between the Philippine and China because this will result to a major systemic war among the great powers in the Indo-Pacific region.
Addressing the Alliance Security Dilemma

“...the U.S. could not guarantee the external defense of the Philippines since American forces had lost a facility from which they could operate.”

Addressing the Alliance Security Dilemma

As a matter of strategic practicality, the U.S.’s ability to guarantee the Philippines’ external defense depends on whether American forces are physically prepositioned to provide immediate response in any strategic contingencies.
The U.S. can immediately and effectively deploy its air and naval assets in any armed contingency in the Spratlys, if these forces have access to facilities near the South China Sea from where they can quickly react during an armed confrontation.
The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) is a 10-year agreement which is a calculated effort by Manila and Washington to make the Philippines a major staging base for projecting American naval and air power in the face of China’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia.
EDCA provides for the establishment of operationally flexible facilities located inside Philippine military bases all over a sprawling archipelagic country located near China. U.S. naval and air assets in these temporary air and naval infrastructures will expedite the rapid and massive deployment of American forces if hostilities break out in the South China Sea, or even in the East China Sea.
The Duterte Administration and the Philippine-U.S. Alliance
President Duterte initiated efforts to show his sensitivity to Chinese security interests as he watered down the previous administration’s efforts to strengthen the Philippine-U.S. alliance.
President Duterte initiated efforts to show his sensitivity to Chinese security interests as he watered down his predecessor’s geo-political agenda on China by halting joint Philippine-U.S. naval patrols, limiting the number and scope of interactions between the Philippine and U.S. militaries, and threatening to unilaterally abrogate EDCA.
President Duterte halted joint Philippine-U.S. naval patrols, limited the number and scope of interactions between the Philippine and U.S. militaries, and threatened to abrogate and watered down and slowed the implementation of EDCA.
President Duterte’s appeasement policy does not sit well with the AFP that has close relations with the U.S. and is anxious that the president is throwing away the only card the Philippines has to play in its territorial dispute with China—U.S. security umbrella.
The AFP and the DND value the Philippine-U.S. alliance. The Philippine and U.S. militaries have been training together for decades to enhance their interoperability—not just in equipment, intelligence, navigation, and communication -- but more importantly, in their common strategic doctrine and outlook.
Changing View on the MDT: From Unreliability to a Tripwire
On May 16, 2018, President Duterte signed the Philippines’ first National Security Strategy (NSS) since it became an independent republic in 1946. The NSS paints a realist picture of the country’s external environment.
It notes that the Philippines has not been confronted by any direct threat of foreign aggression since the end of the Second World War.
The NSS observes that *Pax America* is about to end because of the geo-strategic competition among the great powers in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and the transformation of international order from a unipolar to a multipolar one.
The NSS calls for the Philippines to adopt a more nuanced approach in its foreign policy by implementing a flexible approach in dealing with the great powers in the region.
Changing View on the MDT: From Unreliability to a Tripwire

It proposes that the Philippines must chart its own role in an increasingly multi-polar global order: while at the same time, strengthening and pursuing comprehensive and strategic alliances or cooperation with the Philippines’ friends and partners in the international community.
The 2018 NSS provided the strategic basis for President Duterte and his administration’s key officials to pursue their efforts to solidify even closer relations with China while keeping the U.S. at arm’s length.
The Duterte administration raised the prospect of a joint development with China on sharing resources in the contested waters of the South China Sea. At the same time, he gave statements implying that the Philippines will not get involved in any military dispute between China and the U.S. in the South China Sea.
Secretary Lorenzana and the defense establishment feared that the Philippines might be unnecessarily dragged into an armed confrontation between the U.S. and China.
Changing View on the MDT: From Unreliability to a Tripwire

There are real anxieties about U.S. abandonment within the DND and the AFP despite assurance by American officials that the MDT is an “iron-clad” commitment, which the U.S. will honor, even in the contested islands in the South China Sea.
A significant element in the *Balikatan 2019* was the holding of actual warfighting exercises focusing on live-fire exercises, amphibious operations, and a naval operation involving a seizure of an island by combined Filipino and American forces.
The scale and nature of the military exercise probably alarmed President Duterte given his view that the Philippines should not get involved in the U.S.-China dispute in the South China Sea. If he remained silent regarding this matter, China did not remain quiet about the joint Philippine-U.S. military exercise.
The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson made terse comments regarding the deployment of a U.S. amphibious assault ship outfitted with fifth generation F-35B fighters as part of the April 2019 Balikatan joint military exercise.
An Alliance in Crisis?
In November 2019, the new U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper visited Manila and met Secretary Lorenzana. The two defense secretaries discussed the need to be more vocal about Chinese incursions into the Philippines’ EEZ, and whether or not the MDT covers any armed attacks on Philippine naval vessels in the South China Sea.
At the start of the 2020, the alliance was in a stable state as the Philippine military and defense establishment considered the country’s security relations with the U.S. as an essential foundation of Philippine national security.
President Duterte does not share his military’s positive view of the alliance. In fact, he was alarmed by the AFP’s active agenda of joint exercises and other interchange with the U.S.: while avoiding substantial interchange and exercises with its Chinese counterpart.
In late January 2020, President Duterte said in an interview that a conflict in the South China Sea would crush the Philippines, as he is wary that the American troops would take advantage and the conflict would spiral out of control.
He openly expressed his fears of an intervention by the U.S. that would push any conflict in the South China Sea in an unforeseen direction.
An Alliance in Crisis?

On February 11, President Rodrigo Duterte directed Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin to formally notify the United States (U.S.) that he is terminating the 1999 Philippine-U.S. Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).
The presidential spokesperson’s recent pronouncements implied that President Duterte would also cancel the 1951 MDT and the EDCA. According to Secretary Panelo, this action is “consistent with his stand that the Philippines must stand on its own, that will mean strengthening its own resources, and not leaning on other countries.”
From an Alliance to a Security Partnership?
The Philippine-U.S. alliance is a deep crisis. The termination of the VFA would adversely affect more than 300 joint trainings and activities between the AFP and the U.S. armed services. Aside from its adverse effects on the two allies’ military-to-military activities, it will also hamper U.S. military operations such freedom of operations (FONUPS) patrols in the South China Sea.
Instead of unravelling the 70-year old MDT, the Philippines and the U.S. might consider downgrading their alliance into a security partnership. Through a security partnership both countries can still engage in periodic security meetings and consultations, joint exercises, and other limited defense related activities without a formal defense treaty.
Consequently, both security partners are not required to extend any mutual pledge to come to each other’s assistance or enter in one another’s conflict.
Instead of a formal commitment to assist each other in a conflict, security partners settle for a loose form of alignment that is simply a signaling device and a vague means of mutual reassurance.
The Philippines will lose the alliance’ deterrence effect provided by the only superpower in the world.
This will lead to pressures to increase the Philippine defense budget.
From an Alliance to a Security Partnership?

It will undermine the ongoing AFP modernization.
Downgrading the alliance to a security partnership will generate limited support from the Filipino population.
Conclusion
The current crisis in the alliance provides opportunities for both allies to reflect on the importance of the alliance. The Philippines and the U.S. should examine the possible choices for the alliance; abrogation or business as usual or transformation to a security partnership.
In examining these options, the Philippines should take into account the following: the deterrence effect of the alliance; its impact on defense spending vis-à-vis overall government spending; on the current AFP program of modernization; and the sentiment and the interest of the Filipino nation.
An Alliance in Crisis?

There is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies - And that is to fight without them

— Winston Churchill

AZ QUOTES
Thank you very much for your attention!