



## **The Philippine Policy of Linking Spokes Together: A Focus on the Philippine-Australian Security Partnership**

**Dr. Renato Cruz De Castro**

*De La Salle University*

In late May 2017, about 1,000 Islamic militants led by the Maute group and fighting under the black flag of Islamic Army of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) took control of the central business district of Marawi City. This took President Rodrigo Duterte and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) by surprise. Since he took office in late June 2016, Duterte has focused his attention and the resources and personnel of the Philippine National Police (PNP) on his relentless campaign on illegal drugs. Consequently, the Duterte administration was caught unprepared for an Islamic militant threat that has been festering in Mindanao and that had been reinforced by the arrival of seasoned combatants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Chechnya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Trained for jungle warfare and used in operating in small units, the Philippine military found it difficult to dislodge the militants despite deploying ground troops, armor personnel carriers, and bombing the city from the air. Urban fighting in Marawi exposed the AFP's limitations. Ten Philippine Army troops were killed by friendly air-force fire while 13 Philippine Marines lost their lives in one day of street-to-street fighting with the seasoned militants from all over the world. For the AFP, defeating the ISIS militants in Marawi City as soon as possible became an imperative because a lengthy siege would attract more militants to Mindanao to reinforce their fellow fighters in the city or be deployed in other parts of the island.

Confronted with a terrorist movement capable of waging a conventional warfare in an urban setting, the AFP requested security assistance from its security partners. Consequently, while covering the bloody street-to-street fighting between the AFP and Islamic militants allied to ISIS, an Associated Press correspondent and his photographer saw and took pictures of a US Navy P3 Orion circling the besieged city of Marawi as Philippine Air Force (PAF) helicopters fired rockets on ground targets. News of American military presence in Marawi spread like wildfire in Manila. A day after the reported sighting of the US P3 Orion over Marawi, AFP spokesperson General Restituto Padilla confirmed

that a US Navy aircraft was providing surveillance for the AFP as Philippine soldiers and marines fought house-to-house combat with Muslim militants in Marawi City.

Australia is another security partner of the Philippines that extended immediate and urgent assistance to the AFP during the battle of Marawi. Australia sent two Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) AP-3C Orion aircrafts to provide surveillance and reconnaissance support to the AFP's combat operation against Muslim militants who took control of the city. Signal and photographic intelligence provided by the American and Australian reconnaissance planes enabled the AFP to deploy its FA-50s fighter planes and OV-10 ground attack planes to launch surgical airstrikes on the ISIS' positions in the city. During the fighting, Australia has also considered sending Australian Defense Force (ADF) personnel to the Philippines to advise and assist the AFP in its counter-terrorism campaign against the Islamic militants—something that the ADF has been doing in Iraq. In the aftermath of the battle, Australia has been looking at further collaboration and capacity-building work with the Philippines and other regional partners on fostering cooperation among regional coast guards to tighten border control in the Sulu Sea to limit the movement of money, technology, and fighters to extremist groups in the Southern Philippines.

This commentary examines the Philippines' efforts to connect the separate US bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific region as it forges a security partnership with Australia. It explores this main question: how does the Philippines establish and foster a security partnership with Australia? It also raises the following corollary questions: what are the Philippines' motives in pursuing security partnerships with Australia and other US allies? What are the limits of the Philippine-Australia security partnership?

Philippine-US defense ties are part of a network of bilateral alliances – often called the hub-and-spokes system – that has sustained US strategic leadership in East Asia since the early 1950s. History, however, shows a pattern of alliance disintegration as allies' interests and purposes change in the face of emerging threats or new global conditions. Interestingly, this trend does not apply to the Philippine-US alliance, as well as to US security relations with Japan, South Korea, and Australia. These durable alliances have evolved from mere expedient and mechanical aggregations of national capabilities directed at a specific threat to something qualitatively different. Since the end of the Cold War, the US and its three Asian allies have institutionalized their efforts to minimize their competitive and divergent interests. They have developed a series of interactions to preserve their bilateral relations and/or to form new patterns of security ties among them. Individually and collectively, they have devised diplomatic/strategic processes and built structures that created islands of stability amidst a sea of changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regional security environment. In other words, they have designed new approaches as to security/political management to counter the centrifugal forces weakening their *raison d'etre*, maximize their mutual benefits and minimize alliance costs, and promote their unity and cohesion. These innovations enable the alliances to adjust to a changing politico-security milieu.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 165-166.

Since 2012, the Philippines has actively established security linkages with the US' bilateral defense partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Given the glaring strategic gaps in the AFP's military capabilities, the Philippine defense department relies on cooperation and relationship with its allies and other security partners to assist its pursuit of its mandated missions and objectives.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Philippine military leverages on its security engagements with foreign militaries to augment and/or enhance its sorry-state capabilities to effectively address and respond to security challenges. This policy has its origin in 2011 when the Philippine government adopted a delicate balancing policy in the face of an emergent and assertive China in the South China Sea. As part of this policy, the Aquino administration acknowledged the need for US diplomatic support and military assistance relative to its territorial row with China. Furthermore, the country found it necessary to establish defense linkages with the US' three allies in the region—Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Without any credible military capabilities, the Philippines finds it imperative to leverage on the US and form security partnerships with other American formal allies to enhance its security and develop the AFP's capabilities for territorial defense.<sup>3</sup>

The Philippines formed a security partnership with Japan in June 2015, while the Philippine-Australian security partnership became effective in October 2013. A security partnership is a loose form of alignment that has a distinct structured framework of collaboration between two or more states to address a common security challenge.<sup>4</sup> However, compared to a formal alliance, this partnership does not bind a partner to assist the other during an armed conflict. Furthermore, it is multidimensional rather than simply focused on military cooperation. Through these partnerships, Japan and Australia have provided the Philippines with patrol boats, reconnaissance planes, transport ships, and training on a grant basis. Their goal is to strengthen the Philippines' political will and naval capabilities to confront China's maritime expansion in the Western Pacific and the resurgence of Islamic militancy in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, these strategic arrangements with the Philippines can never substitute for sustained US security engagement in East Asia and merely complement it.

Recently, Japan and Australia have deepened their security partnerships with the Philippines because they do not want the Duterte administration be pulled into China's orbit. Both Tokyo and Canberra have incrementally shored up the capabilities of the Philippine military despite the country's rapprochement with China. This enables Japan and Australia to influence the Philippines as it diplomatically veers away from the US toward China and secondarily to modify unintentionally the American hub-and-spokes system of alliance by increasing the spoke-to-spoke linkages forming several minilateral and plurilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region.

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie Rodulfo-Veril, "AFP Regional Security and Defense Cooperation," *Security Sector Reform: Modern Defense Force Philippines* (Quezon City: Working Group on Security Sector Reform, Ateneo University, 2014), 132-154.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Plans and Program (J-5), *Strategic Direction of AFP International Military Affairs* (Camp Aguinaldo, Office of Plans and Program, May 2010), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "Explaining U.S. Strategic Partnerships in the Asia-Pacific Region: Origins, Developments, and Prospects," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, 2 (August 2014): 263.

The Philippines' efforts to forge security ties with Japan, South Korea, and Australia are hedged on its strategic bets in the light of its limited military capabilities. They likewise augment the country's alliance with the US that serves as a major deterrence against external threats. The Philippines' strategy of linking the spokes of the bilateral alliances together jibes with Washington's agenda of revitalizing America's well-established alliances in Northeast Asia and deepening America's security relationship in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the 1995 Philippine-Australia Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperative Activities provides the legal basis for Philippine-Australian security relations. It enables the ADF and the AFP to undertake several defense related activities in the holding of mutually beneficial cooperative defense activities such as the MTA *LUMBAS* (2001), the First Philippines-Australia Maritime Surveillance Exercise (MARSUVEX), and the Australian hosted multilateral Fleet Concentration Period Exercise *KAKADU*.<sup>6</sup> Aside from these military exercises, there are regular exchange visits by Filipino and Australian defense and high-ranking military officials to boost confidence-building measures and regular intelligence exchanges on various security issues.

The reorientation of Philippine foreign policy under Duterte worries Australia. This move surely steers a traditional stalwart American ally toward becoming an economic satellite of China. Duterte has disrupted the momentum in Philippine-US security relations by questioning the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed by the two allies in 2014. Moreover, Australia is concerned that the prospects of forming a common association with the Philippines that adheres to a rules-based regional order, freedom of navigation, and support for America's role as East Asia's strategic offshore balancer will be thwarted by Duterte's increasingly independent foreign and strategic posture vis-à-vis the US and its other Asian allies.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Australia (along with Japan) is using all means to balance Duterte's policy of weaning away from the US while gravitating closer to China.

The November 2015 Joint Declaration on the Australia- Philippines Comprehensive Partnership (DCP) commits Australia to help the Philippines in defense modernization, including through bilateral and multilateral exercises, education and training, and maritime cooperation. Australian troops participate in the annual Philippine-US *Balikatan* exercises. In 2016, Australia sent 86 ADF personnel, with a contingent of 30-strong Special Forces from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commando Regiment. Australia also utilized an RAAF AP-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft. In 2017, it deployed 80 ADF personnel, and an RAAF Orion patrol aircraft. By participating in four consecutive *Balikatan* exercises, the ADF strengthens its security partnership with the AFP, while maintaining interoperability with the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham M. Denmark and Brian M. Burton, "The Future of U.S. Alliances in Asia," *Global Asia* 5, 4 (Winter 2010), 58.

<sup>6</sup> International Affairs Division, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans (J-5), *Philippines-Australia Defense Relations* (Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans, June 2014), 1.

<sup>7</sup> William Tow, "President Trump and the Implications for the Australia-U.S. Alliance and Australia's Role in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, 1 (April 2017): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Hodge, "Duterte Wins Back US, Allies Military Exercise," *The Australian*, May 9, 2017, 1.

In his meeting with President Duterte, the director-general of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, Mr. Nick Warner, offered Australian technical assistance, training, and information-gathering-and-sharing to the Philippines in its fight against international terrorism.<sup>9</sup> The presidential spokesperson, in turn, said that the Philippines is most interested in intelligence assistance, and is keen on solidifying its defense relationship with Australia.<sup>10</sup> Australia is currently looking at further collaboration and capacity-building work with the Philippines and other regional partners to tighten border control in the Sulu Sea to limit the movement of money, technology, and fighters to extremist groups in the Southern Philippines.<sup>11</sup> In October 2017, the Philippines and Australia signed a security agreement for capacity building and to address the threat of terrorism. Under this agreement, the ADF will send mobile training teams to train the AFP on urban warfare and counter-terrorism.<sup>12</sup> The agreement also stipulates that the RAN will conduct port visits to the Philippines to engage the PN in a range of cooperative activities to support its capability development.<sup>13</sup>

Manila's security ties with Canberra are limited by three constrains. Firstly, located outside of the East Asian region, Australia will always have other security concerns outside of the region. Secondly, Australia will never extend any security guarantee to the Philippines. Thirdly, Australia will only provide military equipment that is geared for maritime surveillance and transport to the Philippines. Canberra will never provide any lethal military combat hardware to the AFP. Like Tokyo, Canberra does not intend to replace Washington as Manila's only formal treaty ally. Australia still values its alliance with the US and actively supports its efforts to remain as a Pacific power determined in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

*\*\* NOTE \*\* This commentary is based on the discussions in the recent Philippine-Australia Dialogue, jointly organized by the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress and the Griffith Asia Institute, and with the support of the Australian Embassy in Manila.*

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Blaxland, Jacinta Carroll, Andrew Carr, and Marty Harris, "Marawi and After: How Australia Can Help," *Policy Option Paper No. 6* (National Security College, Australian National University, August 2017), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Willard Cheng, "Australia Welcomes Philippine Announcement that Combat in Marawi had ended," *ABS-CBN News*, October 24, 2017, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.