

## EYES ON THE PRIZE? PHILIPPINES-US ALLIANCE AND DEFENSE MODERNIZATION

by *Julio S. Amador III*

The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the United States of America and the Republic of the Philippines is now being challenged in the Philippines' Supreme Court on constitutional grounds. Petitioners against the EDCA argue that the agreement violates the Philippines' prohibition against foreign bases unless the Senate concurs with the agreement. The government says the EDCA is an executive agreement and not a treaty; thus, there is no need for the Senate's concurrence. Beyond the legal, the strategic and policy considerations loomed large in the Supreme Court hearings.

What is the EDCA? The agreement, signed in April 2014 by National Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin for the Philippines and Ambassador Philip Goldberg for the US, revitalizes the Philippines-US bilateral security alliance to help the Philippines attain a minimum credible defense posture to respond to regional and global security challenges. The EDCA implements the need to develop the Philippines and the US' defense capabilities in the Asia Pacific region as agreed upon in the Mutual Defense Treaty and the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). The EDCA allows and regulates access and use by the US military of agreed upon areas of some facilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Both sides undertake high-impact and high-value security cooperation exercises, and joint and combined training activities that promote interoperability and capacity building. The experience of the Philippines with the destructive typhoon, Haiyan, also showed the importance of having immediate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), of which the US was able to provide.

The anti-EDCA side argues that the EDCA violates the Philippines' territorial integrity and sovereignty. The agreement is also deemed one-sided as it is claimed that it advances only the US' interest. An important angle raised in the Supreme Court hearings is the strategic concerns in the West Philippine Sea, particularly the maritime disputes involving the Philippines and China. The Supreme Court hearings brought out the continuing inadequacy of the AFP to provide minimum credible defense in light of the challenges in an uncertain regional strategic environment.

While the legal questions are very important, particularly because they touch on sensitive issues for a lot of Filipinos, the problem of defense modernization and credibility is going to be a continuing problem that needs to be addressed.

Under President Benigno S. Aquino III, the Philippines has been seriously engaging in defense modernization. The first phase was to re-orient the focus of the AFP from internal to external security. Under the US security umbrella, which has been in place since the colonial period and strengthened during the Cold War, the Philippines chose to address internal security issues such as responding to a continuing communist insurgency and confronting secessionist issues in Southern Philippines. Now driven by an uncertain regional strategic environment, the government has devoted more resources to a much-needed modernization. The AFP instituted the Long-Term Capability Development Program for the acquisition of multi-purpose attack vessels, naval helicopters, patrol aircrafts and frigates. From the US, the Philippines purchased two decommissioned Hamilton-class cutters named BRP *Gregorio Del Pilar* and BRP *Ramon Alcaraz*. From South Korea, the Philippines acquired 12 TA-50 Golden Eagle light attack aircrafts built by Korea Aerospace Industries. The Philippines is also looking at Italy as a source of military assets and there are plans to procure three AW-109 naval helicopters and two Mestral frigates. From 2002, the defense budget, which was US\$1.9 billion, rose to US\$2.5 billion in 2012.

For the 2015 budget of the AFP, the following were included for procurement: lead-in fighter trainer jets ammunition, long-range patrol aircraft, multi-purpose attack craft, rocket launchers and base upgrades. The AFP was given a budget of around

553 million USD for these defense projects. As of September 2014, 37 military upgrade projects costing 206 million USD were completed. Other projects are due for completion by 2015.

With these developments, the Philippines is on a slow but deliberate process of defense modernization. Institutional challenges will continue to hamper the process. Corruption in the military is still a concern but there are strong efforts to address this. Philippine defense spending is also low and not on par with regional neighbors. The ASEAN average for defense spending is around 3 percent of GDP while the Philippines spends only about 1 percent, the constitutionally mandated cap on defense spending, which should not exceed that of the expenditures for the education sector.

The Philippines-US alliance is still going to be necessary for the foreseeable future even as defense modernization is being undertaken. Only Filipinos will, in the end, be willing to defend the country's borders and its territories. Nevertheless, the long and shared history of the two countries indicates the desire to continue working as allies in an ever-changing regional order.

The Philippines must not lose sight of the goal to achieve credible defense and a sustainable modern military at par with its regional neighbors in ASEAN. The Philippines cannot completely rely on the American security umbrella, which is continuously being rained upon by the Chinese, who seem determined to change the regional security order. Self-help remains to be the name of the game in international security but assistance from allies and other strategic partners should not be rejected but instead used judiciously while the modernization process is underway. Hypothetical questions such as whether the US will come to the defense of the Philippines if the latter is attacked by an external party may make for good conversation pieces, but they miss out on the real objective: a strong, capable, and modern AFP that can exert a defensive shield over the Philippines' maritime boundaries and territories.

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Whether the EDCA is rendered unconstitutional or whether other future agreements may face rough sailing in Philippine political and legal contexts, the fact of the matter is that the Philippines will still need to attain minimum defense credibility and build its external security capability. The Philippines-US alliance, through the MDT, the VFA, and the EDCA as an implementing agreement, is only a means to that necessary end. 🌸

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