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THE GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS: Maintaining the Security Architecture in the Face of Shifting Power Relations*

Introduction

Geopolitics is broadly understood as the relationship between geography and the exercise of power. As such it has been associated with the conduct of power politics in international relations, that is, rivalries between the great powers, and grand strategy. In this context, small states and their place in international relations are given very little consideration.

Recently, however, Philippine foreign policy has attracted quite a bit of attention in the international scene when the administration of President Rodrigo R. Duterte began to take foreign policy directions that was characterized by three points.

The first revolved around the expressions of antipathy by the Philippine President towards the European Union (EU) and the United States – especially when Barrack Obama was still US president – regarding their critical position on the administration's "war on drugs." This was manifested in public talks, speeches, or press conferences delivered by President Duterte, where he used "colorful language" that was insulting and expressed in either humorous or agitated manner. This was particularly jarring for the country's relationship with the US, which has

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largely been described in terms of a historic strategic partnership since the end of the Second World War. Juxtaposed against this development is the second point which some have referred to as a "pivot to China."

The Duterte administration made a strong push to reverse the trend of poor relations with China that was a legacy of the Aquino administration. His approach, however, was hardly idiosyncratic, being widely perceived as ingratiating, if not sycophantic.

These two developments in turn became pieces in the intensifying great power relationship between China and the US – a relationship which has had, as a consequence, the diminished significance of the existing regional architecture built around multilateral arrangements.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), traditionally an important plank of the Philippines' regional engagements, has been laying claim to the centrality of its role in maintaining the cooperative system of regional interstate relations. This, however, gave way to the increasing "central role" of China's network of bilateral relations built around its economic strength and the unwillingness of the US to cede anything to China in terms of its dominant position geopolitically.

The confluence of these three factors was helped along and in turn contributed to the orientation of the direction of the Duterte administration's foreign policy. While hardly a catalyst in the broad sweep of geopolitical developments in the region, it is nonetheless a key indicator of how these developments have moved the region toward a crossroads where decisions will have to be made on what kind of order the region will have to settle for.

This paper attempts to show the nature of the crossroad rather than what is beyond it. It argues that the confluence of an intensifying great power rivalry and a weakening of the existing regional security architecture contributed to a contraction of the strategic space within which the Philippines and its Southeast Asian partners in ASEAN can work between China and the US.

American Hegemonic Decline

A key aspect of the changing regional environment is the argument behind US decline. Susan Strange (1988), in her article, "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," argued that hegemony can be determined through four global structures, namely: security, production, finance, and knowledge.

The point she was making then was that what were then prevalent claims of US hegemonic decline were wrong as the US remained dominant in all these four structures. Using these same metrics, however, we can see that while the US remains dominant in these areas globally, it is no longer unchallenged especially when compared to the period in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 (see Krauthammer, 1990, 1991). The US still has and maintains the most powerful military in the world (see Global Firepower Index 2017 and SIPRI Index on the Top Countries for Military Expenditure 2016); it still has the largest economy in the world and the largest share of the world's GDP (see Gross Domestic Product Ranking 2017); and it is acknowledged as the leading producer of scientific and applied research. China may have the largest foreign exchange reserves (see Country Comparison: Reserves of Foreign Exchange and Gold 2016), but the largest amount of global financial transactions still take place in New York City (see The 20 Largest Stock Exchanges in the World 2017).

By these indicators, the US remains the most dominant country in the world. In fact, President Obama rebutted these claims in his State of the Union Address on January 24, 2012, pointing to the continuing strength of the US and claiming that those who talk about US decline "do not know what they are talking about."

And as noted in what Strange was discussing, this is not the first time that there has been speculation and rebuttal on the relative decline of the US as the dominant superpower, indeed, as the global hegemon (aside from Strange,1988, see also Russett, 1985 and Milner and Snyder, 1988). And yet, there are a number of factors that seem to point out that this time, "it's for real (Rachman, 2011)." The current discussion on the decline of the US as global hegemon was principally brought about by a combination of factors emanating from America's slow economic recovery since 2008, its large fiscal deficits as well as the belief that the US has lost influence because of its overstretched commitments emanating from its responses to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Certainly, the economic crisis that hit the US in September 2008 opened up widespread discussions on the issue (see, for example, Acharya, 2012; Clark and Hoque, 2012; Ipek, 2013; and Zakaria, 2008). The way it handled questions about the detainee facilities in Guantanamo, the use of torture against the detainees in these facilities as a way of getting intelligence, and just the overall conduct of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a loss of its international moral standing and weakened the impact of its "soft power" (Kagan, 2012).

The US hegemony, however, was always most strongly felt in its ability to inform and enforce global norms, values, and culture. And, it is in these areas that some degree of US decline is showing largely because of a fragile national consensus on what America stands for (the so-called culture war in America), and consequently, an increasingly polarized polity (see, for example, Goodman, 2019). The election of Donald Trump and his pandering to nationalist sentiments seem to indicate that there is popular dissatisfaction and even fatigue with the globalist policies that US presidential administrations have pursued especially in the last thirty years that cuts across ideological lines. This is a domestic political debate, but one that has implications for what role the US will play in what is clearly a changing global and regional order.

China's Rise and Pursuit of a Greater Global Role

Arguments about the decline of American hegemony are often accompanied by discussions on the rise of China (see, for example, Lake, 2006; Layne, 2008; Luce, 2012; Rachman, 2011; and Schweller and Pu, 2011). Indeed, China has reached a position in international relations that makes it a significant, if not the most significant player in regional affairs. It is poised to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy with projections that this could happen before 2030 (see Colville, 2017). The International Monetary Fund had in fact noted that this had happened in 2014 if economies were measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms (see Carter, 2014). China's share of global productivity has been rising and is expected to overtake the US by this year (see Patton, 2016).

From a geopolitical standpoint, this economic rise, which was the foundation of the "peaceful rise" of China thesis, has now been leveraged by China to challenge the US for dominance in the Asia Pacific and expand China's reach globally. First, they have been able to make China either the most important or second most important economic partner of practically every country in the region. In many cases, this has been used as a pressure point to push China's political agenda (see discussion below on ASEAN). Second, they are now seeking to rebuild the "regional architecture" but with China as its focal point.

Two overarching projects underpin this. First is the Belt and Road Initiative, which one Filipino military analyst has characterized as a strategic reach for dominance using an economic platform, and the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Using its economic influence (and, in a number of cases, economic dependence on China grows), China effectively constrained the hedging strategies that many countries in the region seek to use in their relations with the US and China. Its economic reach constricted the scope within which countries in the region, especially smaller ones, can maneuver politically.

Second, precisely because they made it more difficult for countries around the region to maneuver politically, they became more assertive in their attempts to shape regional norms and processes, (e.g. promoting bilateral mechanisms even as it seems to support multilateralism), enforcing their interpretation of terms of engagement on disputes (e.g. South China Sea and cross-Straits relations), and even on the legitimacy of the participation of countries in these norms and processes (e.g. only those who were directly involved in disputes could be involved in discussions about these disputes). By doing this, it sought to further limit the wiggle room for hedging strategies.

Economic carrots and sticks were combined with normative structures that favored China's structural advantages. Furthermore, these courses of action not only emphasized China's strengths but also exhibited the limitations of existing security structures. The emergence of China as a regional power with hegemonic characteristics raised questions about what kind of regional order would shape a region projected to be the hub of global economic production and trade in this century.[1] Beyond the economic implications, however, China's emergence opened up a significant discussion on the issue of how this development affects regional security in East Asia and the broader Asia Pacific.

The Waning of Asean Centrality and of the Existing Regional Architecture

In the years since 1994, when the ASEAN Regional Forum, (ARF) was established, regional dynamics had largely been filtered through concentric and overlapping circles of multilateral arrangements that emphasized cooperation on multiple issues at multiple levels. The effectiveness of this

[1] There have been so many references to the Asian or Pacific century in books and conferences.

system, however, was premised on the willingness of the great powers to accede to regional arrangements and decisions reached therein. With China's rise and increasing challenges to the existing order, this "architecture" is effectively being undermined. A key feature of this "regional architecture" was the notion of "ASEAN centrality" (see Tan, 2013). While vague in what it means, it essentially revolved around the fact that ASEAN became a hub for networks of discussions and meetings intended to build regional consensus on what constituted common concerns and what to do with them.

As such, ASEAN provided the venue for these meetings (e.g. the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Plus 3, and others), the agenda, and the rules of participation. If contraposed to what China has been doing, its supposed support for ASEAN centrality is belied by its activities which effectively undermine ASEAN centrality. This was further weakened by how the US deals with China – limited regional cooperation on specific issues but overlaid by strategic competition. The great power compact to support ASEAN and ASEAN-driven multilateralism is effectively gone and a foundational element of ASEAN Centrality is no longer extant (see Goh, 2012; Tow, 2012).

In 2011, the Obama administration pushed what became known as the US rebalancing strategy to Asia. Central to it was the shifting of 60 percent of US naval power to the Pacific, as well as the re-establishment of US political and economic leadership in the region. The Obama administration always emphasized the point that this strategy was not specifically a response to the emergence of China as a dominant power in the Asia Pacific. Whether this is true or not, the rise of China has caught the attention of strategic planners in the US.

In January 2012, the US Department of Defense announced that among its priorities was the "necessity [to] rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region" as "[o]ver the long term, China's emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the US economy and our security in a variety of ways (2012; p. 2).

Again, whether or not the pivot is not directed against an emergent China, the Chinese nonetheless do see it in those terms. An argument was made in Chinese policy and academic circles about how the US feels compelled to increase its participation in regional affairs because of its weakened global stature – and, thus, became more strident in its involvement in territorial disputes in the region (Suryodiningrat, 2013; Jia, 2013). These developments are shaping regional order in a way that ASEAN is absolutely powerless to do anything about.

Summation and Observation

America continued to strategize an approach towards the Asia Pacific region that would meet China's rise. The rebalancing strategy gave way to rhetoric about an Indo-Pacific strategy. This had little traction, however, as the rhetoric was not matched by a clear operational idea of what it had included. Attempts to establish parallel tracks to China's approach to regional cooperation seem likewise to have a limited prospect.

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, formerly the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), would be a more serious proposition with the US in it. It would be able to present an alternative track to China's Belt and Road Initiative. With the US before, it was already a hard-sell to countries in the region. Without the US, there is little urgency for anyone to join it especially since China's own offerings require so little in terms of admission.

This does not show the US having relinquished its position of hegemony. That America remains dominant is not being questioned. It does show how the age of American unipolarity can now be said to be at an end. Developments in the Asia Pacific region raised the prospect of a return to balance of power politics. These emerging trends portend an emerging security dilemma for the region. The intensifying rivalry between China and the US more clearly emphasizes traditional international relations and security with its emphasis on inter-state relations and competition.

The revitalization of alliance politics, increasing emphasis on maritime territorial issues, and re-militarization of political dynamics in the Korean peninsula only contribute to this framing of regional relations. On the other hand, the multilateral mechanisms that had ASEAN at the center emphasizes cooperation, at least normatively if not always materially. In this context, non-traditional security concerns were the principal area of discussion and debate. The dilemma lies in the way that the great power dynamic between China and the US, without the moderating influence of multilateral platforms, will increasingly push regional security relations into a competitive context reminiscent of balance of power politics.

Unfortunately, the same dynamic is undermining the influence and impact of existing multilateral institutions and arrangements (exemplified by ASEAN and ASEAN-driven mechanisms) designed precisely to mitigate the effect of great power politics and competition. Unless the regional order moves away from this trend, the prospect of cooperative security with its less conflict-oriented framing of security would be difficult to sustain.

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