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## The US Interests in Philippines-China Relations\*

### Introduction

It should be clear that the approach in this paper is to not talk about the particular personalities or news of the moment. For instance, President Rodrigo R. Duterte switched from cursing former United States President Barack Obama in 2016 to serenading President Donald Trump in 2017 (Rood, 2017). Or the American military has been consistent in maintaining a stepped-up presence in the South China Sea despite the ups and downs of Trump's "trade war" with China (Mogato, 2019).

In the late 1800s, the Foreign minister of the United Kingdom, Lord Palmerston, observed that in international relations, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests. That will be the focus of this paper – to describe the interest of the US, whether or not Trump has any interest in the geopolitics of the Philippines-China relations.

### Location, Location, Location

For the Philippines, its fate often seems to be determined by its position on the globe. Before Ferdinand Magellan, there were trade routes involving China and the larger Southeast Asian region. This larger interaction led to the introduction of Islam into the Sulu archipelago and elsewhere in the islands. However, regional disruption was on the horizon as the

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Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511. The struggle between European imperialism and local rulers began – a struggle over trade, with the Spice Islands (Maluku Islands) as a focus.

A search for access to the Spice Islands led the Spanish to the archipelago that we now call the Philippines, where disappointingly spices seemed not to be prevalent. In fact, in a twist of historical fate, the islands themselves ought not have gone to the Spanish since the Philippines is on the wrong side of the line established by the 1529 Treaty of Zaragoza (the follow-up to the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas down the Atlantic marking the division between Spain and Portugal, making so Brazil Portuguese-speaking). The fact that the Philippine islands seemed to be of little economic value in themselves (and that the two crowns were united from 1580 to 1640) meant that the Spain got to keep them.

The attractiveness of the islands to Spain lay in the souls to be converted to Christianity and its proximity to China. Trade between China and the islands had been going on for centuries, and Manila was a thriving port with Chinese vessels in it when the Spanish conquered it in 1571. Almost immediately, the Spanish started mulling the conquest of China, but King Philip II never approved of such a fanciful idea and the 1588 destruction of the Spanish Armada put an end to any such speculation. Rather, Manila was used as an entrepôt for the exchange of New World silver for Chinese goods in what has been dubbed “the birth of globalization” (Gordon and Morales). The galleon trade, rather than exploitable resources, is what made the newest imperial possessions attractive to Spain (the colony was not financially self-sustaining until the establishment of the tobacco monopoly two centuries later).

At the end of the 19th century, the Philippines’ geographic location again made it attractive to the American imperial project. In 1893, the US Census Bureau announced that the latest census showed that the frontier line (beyond which population density was below two per square mile) no longer existed in the mainland, excluding Alaska. Extra-continental expansion did occur, with the US taking possession of Guano Islands (for their fertilizer resources) in the second half of the 19th century, including Midway Islands in 1898, and a long process of increasing American domination led to the annexation of Hawaii in 1900. A vision of naval power led to a desire for far-flung basing possibilities, and the Spanish-American War was the impetus for a quick strike in the Battle of Manila Bay. This was followed by the bloody Philippine-American War, resulting in the US acquiring territory in the Western Pacific.





During the American period, it became obvious that Japan would be interested in the Philippine archipelago but preparations for that eventuality proved insufficient (McCoy, pp. 982-984). After World War II, the American bases were central to relations between the newly independent Philippines and the US and were key installations in both the Cold War and in the shooting war in Vietnam (Cooley, Chapter 3). Even though the US bases in the Philippines were closed in 1992, in the wake of a Philippine Senate vote to not renew the bases treaty, the Philippines and the US continue to enjoy robust military cooperation under a series of agreements reached since 1992, including the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed in 2014.

This may seem surprising, considering some of the rhetorical forays of Duterte, but it is emblematic of the fact that interests tend to go beyond personalities. While the military relationship has many aspects, including combatting violent extremism (predominantly in the southern Philippines) and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response, as in the aftermath of the 2013 Super Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda, for this article, the focus is on great power rivalry with China.

## It takes Two to Tangle

Recently, in considering the rise of China to be the second largest economy in the world, with various projections of when it might pass the US to be the largest economy in the world, Graham Allison has popularized the term, “Thucydides Trap” (2017). This allusion to classical Greece comes from Thucydides’s *The History of the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens*. Thucydides explained, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” Sparta was the famous martial power while Athens was the center of a rising commercial empire.

Looking at history, Allison’s team found 16 cases in the last 500 years where a rising power challenged a dominant power, 12 of which led to war (Allison, pp. 41-42). Three of these cases were in the 20th century, two in Europe (World War I and World War II, where the rising power was Germany), and one in Asia (where the rising power, challenging the US, was Japan). It is useful to note that this idea, of the danger that the fear of a rising power causes a war, has been in the international relations discipline for 50 years under the label Power Transition theory developed by A.F.K. Organski (Kugler, 2011). Power Transition theory was explicitly opposed to the so-





called “balance of power” theory, that the best guarantee of peace was a rough equivalency among powers. In Power Transition theory, the greatest danger of war was when a rising power approached equivalency with an established power – the rising power may want to use force to “seize its chance” while the established power would want to use force “before it’s too late.”

An interesting empirical fact is that defeat in these wars tends not to, in the long run, deflect the rise of the new powers. Thus, Germany rose from the ashes twice after World Wars I and II; after the first war to be the instigator of the second, and after the second to become the largest economy in Europe. Similarly, Japan rose from the ashes of total defeat in World War II to seemingly threaten American global economic dominance by the 1980s, though in recent decades, that narrative line faded in the face of Japanese economic problems.

The “rise of China” is evident to all observers – depending on the measures used and projection techniques, China has already passed the US on economic output or will do so within the next decade. The question for the US is how to react to this new reality. For almost 20 years, the dominant American approach was to involve China in a number of the institutions of what is generally referred to as the “liberal world order,” for example, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1991 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Some even hoped (based on what amounts to mainstream modernization theory) that economic growth would lead China to become more like western-style democracies.

On the Chinese side, the 1990 advice of Deng Xiaoping to “hide your strength and bide your time” meant that often, their economic growth was not seen as threatening. The strategy was not to contain China as a rival, as had been the long-term thrust against the Soviet Union, but to incorporate it into the liberal world order. However, in recent years, a general consensus has grown up in America that this strategy of incorporation did not work. For instance, Americans came to believe that accession to the WTO did not stop discrimination against foreign firms, intellectual property theft, and others. In particular, in the face of such statements by China President Xi Jinping as “our military must regard combat readiness as the goal for all its work and focus on how to win when it is called upon,” the American foreign policy establishment has been rethinking its approach.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It must be emphasized that the much-touted “trade war” between China and the US under Trump does not enjoy wide agreement. Rather, it is often viewed as the rough equivalent of two antagonists shooting themselves in the foot and not in the American interest.





## 'This National Security Strategy puts America First'

As might be expected from an administration whose head campaigned on the promise to “make America great again,” the argument is clear:

These competitions [with inter alia, China and Russia] require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false (US, 2017, p. 3).

Particularly relevant for the Philippines is that much of the foreign policy establishment is in agreement with the events in the South China/West Philippine Sea. Its efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability (US, 2017, p. 46). While the US takes no position on sovereignty issues within the contested sea, it does vigorously defend the freedom of navigation (as it interprets it), with Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) being regularly undertaken to contest Chinese claims over the entire sea within the so-called “nine-dash line.”

## Geography, not Economics

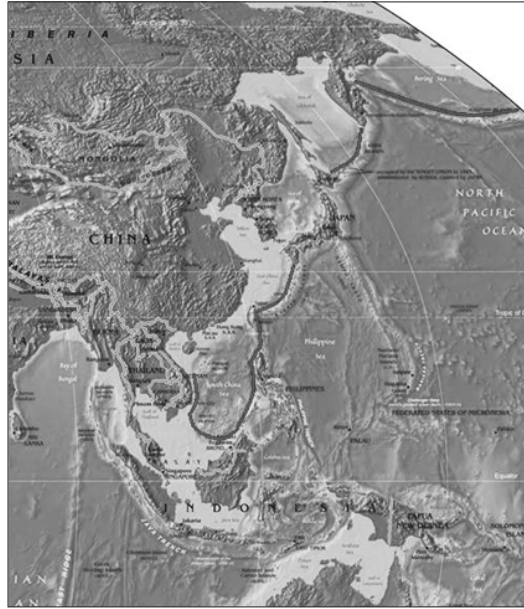
In the 21st century, as in the 16th century, the interests of major powers in the Philippines tends not to be focused on the resources of the country, or the economic relations the powers have with the archipelago. The Philippines is not a small country, ranking 13th in the world in terms of population, but its economy is only 39th or so. China and America could (and do) engage in trading relations or a trade war with no reference to the Philippines.

American interest in the Philippines has shifted over recent years. Since the launch of the global war on terrorism after the 9/11 attack in the US, considerable American attention was focused on the southern Philippines, wherein violent extremist elements linked first to Al Qaeda and later to the Islamic State were countered by American assistance to the Philippine government. But in the current climate, American attention has shifted to state competitors and away from non-state actors (Mogato, 2019). Whether the focus is the Asia-Pacific or the recently reemphasized Indo-Pacific, it is clear that the competitor in this region is China (as it is Russia in Europe and perhaps, the Middle East).





Currently, the South China Sea is a prominent zone of contention involving China, the US, and the Philippines. But when we look at the map, we see a larger geographical reality, often called the “first island chain.” Between China and the broad reaches of the Pacific Ocean, there is a long series of islands that, depending on the point of view, either could bar China from the Pacific or could serve as bases for attack on China (in the line of the original fanciful Spanish colonial dream). Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines are all militarily supported by the US, the largest economy in the world.



The “first island chain” perimeter was derived from “Asia’s balance of power: China’s military rise,” and “China’s military rise: The dragon’s new teeth.” *The Economist*, April 7, 2012. (Suid-Afrikaanse. (2012). *Creative Commons*. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19030546>.

China, the second largest economy, must deal with this geographic reality no matter what intentions it may have. But the American interest in the same geographic fact is clear, and is linked to America’s stance in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Straits, and the South China Sea.

One of the purposes of the 2014 EDCA would be to pre-position American equipment and supplies in facilities on Philippine bases. Depending on the emphases mutually agreed upon by the Philippines and the US, these could be used for HADRor in the event of an incident in the South China Sea. Recently, the US reiterated that any attack on Philippine forces in the area would trigger the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, which is still in effect even after the lapse in 1992 of the Bases Treaty (De Castro, 2019). However, it is not clear that the current Philippine administration is interested in facilitating American access to the bases for this purpose (as opposed to a less controversial HADR focus).





## Conclusion

The US does vital geographic strategic interests in the Philippines vis-à-vis China which provides the Philippines with some leeway to engage in the kind of hedging behavior possible for small powers, where major powers are played off against each other. The pivot of the current Philippine administration to China may have increased the incentive of the US to make its position clear on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. It is probably not a coincidence that in late 2018, after decades of effort, the bells of Balangiga, a war booty retained by US forces after the Philippine-American War, were finally restored to their original church in Samar.

So, by virtue of its geographical position on the globe, the Philippines is on the front line of a new great power competition that looms over the next decades. This may be an uncomfortable spot to be, but this is the neighborhood in which the country is fated to be located.

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