Philippine-American Relations

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Relations between the Philippines and the United States (US) have traditionally been very good. Both our governments and our peoples have been close over the years. Today, more than 100,000 US nationals reside in the Philippines, while there are some two million Filipino-Americans in the United States.

There was a marked downturn in our bilateral defense cooperation ties after the US bases left Clark and Subic in the early nineties, but even this did not sever our alliance, which is founded on a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). Nor did it alter the fact that the Philippines and the United States share fundamental interests as allied democracies in securing peace, stability and freedom in the Asia-Pacific region.

Both sides have worked closely together to ensure that the Philippine-American alliance will be effective in addressing the new security requirements of the post-Cold War world. Towards this end, we concluded a bilateral Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) a few years after the departure of the US bases. The VFA allowed our defense forces to resume large-scale exercises, joint training and other joint activities.

The Philippines had been fighting terrorism for years before September 11, 2001. Philippine-American counterterrorism cooperation antedated the tragedy of September 11 as well.

However, our cooperation against terrorists, their networks and their supporters intensified almost immediately after September 11. Both the Philippines and the United States were equally resolved to stand up to the evil forces that sow death and destruction in the name of a twisted theology.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was the first Asian leader after September 11 to pledge full support to the international counterterror coalition. The Philippines announced that it would provide the United States with intelligence cooperation, overflight clearance and access to the former base facilities at Clark and Subic for transit and staging purposes. The Philippines was prepared to extend logistical support in the form of food supplies, medicines and medical personnel. It also pledged it would consider sending combat troops if there was an international call to do so.

At home, the Philippines strengthened anti-terrorist measures. It passed essential anti-money-laundering legislation to sever possible financial links to terrorists. Operations against terrorist cells, several in cooperation with other countries, were intensified and succeeded in disrupting some planned attacks.

The Philippines welcomed US assistance in its campaign to suppress the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group, which continues to hold two Americans and a Filipino hostage. About
six hundred and sixty US troops have come over as trainers, advisers and support units. With material and moral backing from the United States, Philippine soldiers will be able to prosecute a fight to the finish against the Abu Sayyaf.

The Philippines is doing its part to promote regional counterterror cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. The Philippines is drafting an information-sharing agreement to make it easier to monitor and apprehend terrorists who cross with Indonesia and Malaysia. The agreement would be open to other ASEAN countries to join.

Although important, particularly at the moment, defense and security matters form only one part of the overall Philippine-American partnership. The economic and development dimension is just as important. The Philippines has been a recipient of US development assistance, food aid and other programs for many years. American assistance has been effective. It has helped to build communities and institutional capacity, to spur grassroots and productivity programs, and to energize education, health and environmental activities.

American aid has also been utilized to advance the peace process in the Southern Philippines. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, has helped stabilize post-conflict areas by integrating former combatants and encouraging livelihood projects in strife-torn localities.

On the private sector side, the United States is the largest overseas export market of the Philippines. American investments are the largest foreign investments in the country in cumulative terms. The United States is the biggest source of travelers visiting the Philippines.

In today’s global economy, American firms are finding the Philippines to be an excellent investment site. They are attracted by the Philippines’ large, educated, English-proficient and trainable work force. The Philippines also has abundant space, rich natural resources and a strategic business location in the heart of Asia’s reviving market. In addition, US companies are favored in the Philippines by a transparent business environment, a stable economic policy regime that encourages free enterprise, and a legal system where the rule of law is in clear evidence.

The Philippines is competitive in the information technology (IT) sector. American and other foreign firms have carved a niche in the Philippines as an ideal place for relocating back-room, call service and business support operations. Indeed, Philippine IT workers are so capable that they reportedly make up the fourth largest contingent of foreign-skilled computer workers coming to the United States.

The Philippines is committed to expanding its trade and investment ties with the United States and the rest of the world. After all, the only way to survive globalization is to keep growing with the global economy. The Philippines is thus an avid supporter of
regional economic integration, through the mechanisms of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), APEC and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Philippines would not be averse to considering other free trade arrangements when the time is right.

The US must take the lead in pushing for greater global trade, investment, aid flows and technology transfer. This is a special responsibility of the United States as the possessor of the world’s largest, most innovative and currently most stable economy. It would set all countries back if the United States should fall victim to an upsurge in domestic protectionism.

Access to the American market, American capital and American know-how is important for developing nations. Placing constraints on such access, particularly when global foreign aid flows are now so low, inflicts an unjust burden on developing countries, including the Philippines, that are trying their best to play by the rules of freer trade and more open markets.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has made the strengthening of Philippine-American relations on all fronts a major foreign policy priority of her Administration. She carried this message with her when she paid her first official visit to the United States as Chief Executive of the Philippines last November.

Her visit was very successful. She established excellent personal rapport with President George W. Bush. She consolidated bilateral cooperation with the United States against terrorists in the Southern Philippines. American defense and security assistance announced during President Arroyo’s visit was almost $100 million.

Moreover, President Arroyo and her Administration are intent on accelerating development as the only true way of securing a lasting peace in the troubled portions of the Southern Philippines. In pursuit of this objective, President Bush announced during President Arroyo’s visit a special assistance package for Mindanao in the South, which is home to the majority of Filipino Muslims.

Philippine-American cooperation to improve the socio-economic condition of Filipino Muslim communities demonstrates that neither Manila nor Washington regards the war against terrorism as a crusade against Islam. Many Filipino Muslim areas lag far behind the rest of the Philippines in development, literacy, public health and basic social services. President Arroyo is determined to narrow that gap. She also is determined to encourage more interfaith dialogue to deepen mutual understanding among different religions in the Philippines, where church and state are separate, and where diversity and tolerance are respected.

President Arroyo brought one more message to the United States. She expressed her belief to President Bush that the war against terrorism should be fought in parallel with the war on poverty. The swamp that breeds terrorists must be drained and a large part of that swamp is mired in poverty, ignorance, injustice and deprivation.
In the Philippines it has long been recognized that military solutions by themselves cannot resolve the roots of political violence. Of course, poverty by itself does not directly produce terrorists. But it makes those who already see themselves as victims of an exploitative and uncaring world much more vulnerable to manipulation by extremists, hate-mongers and terrorists.

US leadership in the international campaign against global terrorism should take this into account. Terrorists can be vanquished by the force of arms and armies. Their cause, however, can only be defeated by the force of countervailing ideas and commensurate action to make the world more tolerant, humane and just.