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Australia-Philippines Relationship Status: “It’s Complicated”

BY CHARMAINE DEOGRACIAS AND ORRIE JOHAN

Charmaine Deogracias and Orrie Johan, Journalist at Vera Files, and researcher at the East-West Center in Washington, respectively, explain that “Relations are also affected by Duterte’s skepticism of Australian and U.S. resolve in supporting the Philippines, and by Australia’s concerns about a shift by Duterte away from the U.S. and towards China. These trends pose major challenges for Philippines-Australia relations and risk causing them to deteriorate.”

The Philippines and Australia fought side by side in the 1944-1945 campaign that liberated the Philippines from Japanese occupation. After the war, both countries forged alliances with the United States, as Australia and an independent Philippines became increasingly friendly. Today, with their overlapping and proliferating security partnerships, Australia and the Philippines have built on seven decades of bilateral ties to become comprehensive partners.

The two countries share an interest in the continued security and stability of the region and in freedom of navigation of the seas. The rising strength of China also looms large in the security calculus of each country. Both are trying to navigate the vast economic benefits and security concerns that China’s rise presents in the region, and this focus has brought the two countries much closer together. A major difference between the two is that the Philippines has a territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea while Australia does not. This means that for a time Australia was more worried than the Philippines about being entrapped into a war against China. Now that friendly relations between China and the Philippines have been restored under Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who vowed to rely on China economically, there is greater convergence with Australian interests in avoiding conflict with China. But Philippines-Australia relations are now being undermined by the new Philippine government’s allergic reaction to human rights and resulting criticisms by Australian and U.S. governments. Relations are also affected by Duterte’s skepticism of Australian and U.S. resolve in supporting the Philippines, and by Australia’s concerns about a shift by Duterte away from the U.S. and towards China. These trends pose major challenges for Philippines-Australia relations and risk causing them to deteriorate.

Australia’s Cautious Bilateralism

Australia has chosen to respond to the risk of increased regional instability by pursuing closer ties with many of its neighbors in the region, including with the Philippines. Until recently, Australia relied on its close alliance with the U.S. for its security and did not pursue strong security relationships with many other countries in the region. China’s growing challenge to U.S. predominance in the Asia-Pacific has led Australia to shift its approach by bolstering its ties with other regional powers, such as Japan and India. This trend was strongly encouraged by the U.S., which under the Obama administration has advocated a similar approach to others throughout the region to help develop an Asia-Pacific Principled Security Network and boost regional stability. However, this approach has also become more attractive for Australia because of concerns that the U.S. could reduce its regional presence or even surrender its regional leadership role in the long-term, given growing opposition to international engagement within the United States. In such a scenario, strong Australian ties with other countries in the region could provide additional leverage in future interactions with China.

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Among these bilateral partnerships, Australia’s relationship with the Philippines has been one of its fastest growing. Bilateral security cooperation began in earnest in 2005 when the Australian government expressed interest in assisting the Philippines with counterterrorism challenges. The relationship has since deepened to include a Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA), which went into force in 2012. Australia now conducts joint military drills with the Philippines, and has participated in the annual Philippines-U.S. Balikatan exercises since 2014. Australia has also supported the Philippines’ right to pursue an international arbitration tribunal’s judgement on its disputes with China in the South China Sea, over Chinese objections. However, despite these major bilateral advances, there have been signs that Australia is less willing than the Philippines to consolidate strong ties. Australia chose to sign a comprehensive partnership with the Philippines rather than the stronger strategic partnership that the Philippines sought, even as it chose to ink such an agreement with Singapore. The reason for this appears to be that Australia has historically avoided escalating tensions in the region and chosen to refrain from pursuing a strategic partnership or alliance with the Philippines due to concerns that such an action could undermine stability in the South China Sea or force Australia into a conflict with China.

The Philippines’ Pivot to China

Given the foreign policy shifts that Duterte is seeking, Australia’s calibrated form of security engagement with the Philippines is the kind that Duterte favors for now. His independent foreign policy is shaping up to have Russia as an ally, China as an economic partner, and have Japan compete with China to provide economic benefits and regional security for the Philippines. Duterte would prefer to keep the status quo with the US alliance and the Australian comprehensive partnership, but their criticisms of his controversial anti-drug campaign will complicate this. Australia and the U.S. have provided a great deal of support to the Philippine military but Duterte has questioned Australian and U.S. resolve against China. He also criticized the US and Australia for meddling in Filipino affairs by condemning his anti-drug campaign that has so far resulted in over 3,000 extra-judicial killings. But his anti-U.S. sentiments are more deep-seated for personal and ideological reasons.

Changing the rhetoric on the South China Sea issue post-arbitration ruling, Duterte has chosen to take a more conciliatory approach in resolving territorial disputes with China and is poised to settle the contentious issue of sovereignty bilaterally. He has not sought a complete overhaul of his predecessor’s policies, as he expressed willingness to maintain close ties with Japan, which has become concerned at Duterte’s talk of radical shifts by the Philippines towards China. He is open to joint military exercises with Japan, but has redirected the focus of bilateral drills with U.S. armed forces from maritime security to humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism, and scrapped naval drills such as amphibious landings and boat raids altogether. Duterte has not yet spoken of abandoning Australia or reducing the already low scale military exercises with it the way he has about the United States. But the fact is that Australia’s criticisms of Duterte’s extra-judicial domestic policies and controversial comments have put Australia on Duterte’s watch list alongside the European Union and the United Nations. It appears that under Duterte, Australian ambivalence towards stronger ties with the Philippines is beginning to be reciprocated.

Until recently, the main factor complicating Australia-Philippines relations was a divergence in attitudes to the risk of conflict against China. While that is no longer the case, differences over the Duterte administration’s policy approaches are now the primary obstacle to strengthening Australia-Philippines ties. These concerns will prevent the bilateral relationship from improving and may even undermine it in the future.

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APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

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Charmaine Deogracias is a journalist writing for Vera Files in the Philippines. She can be reached at charmdeogracias@gmail.com.

Orrie Johan is a researcher at the East-West Center in Washington. He recently obtained a master’s degree in Security Studies from Georgetown University. He can be contacted at orrie.johan@gmail.com