

Commentary

## **TOWARD AN INDEPENDENT PHILIPPINE FOREIGN POLICY: IS CHANGE COMING?**

Roland G. Simbulan\*

As the nation celebrates its 118th Independence Day this month, and likewise awaits its maverick president-elect Rodrigo Duterte to assume office as its 16th president, it is best to ask, "What direction will Philippine foreign policy have?" Change is coming, they say.

This is a president-elect who proudly proclaims that during his college days, he was a member of the Kabataang Makabayan (KM). KM led the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations during the 60s and early 70s in front of the U.S. Embassy and supported the Vietnamese people's struggle for national liberation against U.S. imperialism.

This is a president-elect who believes that Lapu Lapu's victory against Spanish conquistadores at the Battle of Mactan on April 27, 1521 should be declared as a national holiday. Now, if this is a leader who believes that it is the Filipino people's victories and triumphs that should be celebrated as official national holidays (and not humiliating defeats like the Fall of Bataan), then we might as well celebrate also the 1901 Balangiga victory of our freedom fighters in Samar who wiped out almost an entire company of the first U.S. Visiting Forces in their island who had engaged in property destruction and food deprivation.

Thus, we might as well officially celebrate our Senate's rejection of the bases treaty on Sept. 16, 1991 because for the first time, after 1946, we stood up and said No to Uncle Sam on that historic day. This is a president-elect who, in his own words, promises that the country will not be a "lackey" to any country but will truly pursue an independent path based solely on its national interests in its relations with other nations.

Duterte's critical attitude with U.S. forces has its roots in the Michael Meiring case in May, 2002 where Philippine sovereignty was treated like a doormat. Then, an alleged American CIA undercover operative Meiring --fronting as a businessman whose surname turned out to be an alias of Vande-Meer -- was injured by an explosion in his hotel room where he was assembling explosives. This was about the same time that bombs were mysteriously exploding in Davao City. Placed under police custody in a local hospital, he was unceremoniously spirited away by FBI agents who brought him to the United States. This was a slap on the local government of Davao led by Mayor Duterte who considers Meiring's escape to elude Philippine justice in total disregard of our laws and courts when U.S. government agents sneaked him out of our jurisdiction.

Is change coming, as trumpeted by the Duterte campaign posters? What we know is that the incoming president is not afraid of ANY big power or any country for that matter that tramples on Filipino dignity and its national sovereignty. Beyond flag raising ceremonies or singing the national anthem, there are issues that urgently need to be addressed by the national leadership. These issues are:

1. The loss of control of Philippine economic sovereignty to the rampaging forces of big business-led globalization must be stemmed. This is a requirement for genuine agricultural and industrial development to be put in place so that job-creating national industries can be created. Perhaps many of our leaders have forgotten the constitutional state policy that economic

relations with other countries must not weaken, but should strengthen the Filipinos' control over their own economy, national patrimony and natural resources.

2. The Philippines must not allow itself to be used and sacrificed as a pawn of any big power in their contention to wrest control of the South China Sea and its resources; thus EDCA, VFA and the Mutual Defense Treaty must be reviewed for eventual abrogation. Thus, Philippine interests in the South China Sea must be defended and asserted without being a pawn to the U.S war machine, the U.S. Asian Pivot and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But likewise, the Philippines must not lose substantial economic gains from the rise of China as the world's largest economy and must not be side-lined from the benefits from the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB).
3. Our foreign policy must be responsive to the needs of the more than 10 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who are often victimized by the modern slave trade and by national policies which exports our precious human resources who are offered in the altar of market-oriented globalization through educational policies like the K to 12 which are really anti-poor.
4. Finally, we should utilize and maximize foreign relations to enhance the capacity of the country for disaster, relief and rehabilitation to confront typhoons, earthquakes and other disasters especially from countries with strong civil defense and efficient disaster management experiences. Foreign technical support for disaster management, not U.S. counter-insurgency forces should be tapped. Duterte in his previous statements as mayor has said on many occasions that the U.S. is using our territory for covert operations against our own countrymen, camouflaged as disaster response and humanitarian assistance units. This is to justify the stationing of U.S. military forces in our territory for a role against other countries and peoples hostile to U.S. interests but who are not enemies of the Philippines.

The incoming president has shown that he is not afraid to take on anybody. Not international and local drug and criminal syndicates. Not even the Church, the media. Nor even a military superpower like the United States, or China.

In 2013 while serving as mayor of Davao City, Duterte has already stood his ground in denying the U.S. government's request to establish a base in Davao City for U.S. drone operations in Mindanao. In that instance he justified this by saying that "drones just give the U.S. the ability to execute the perceived enemies of America, in any part of the world." Earlier, in 2007, he convinced the Davao City Council to turn down a request by the national government to hold PH-US Balikatan Exercises in areas covered by Davao City, saying that U.S. troops "are not welcome in Davao". Duterte then said that the "U.S. military will only invite magnets of attacks" on our nation by enemies of the United States.

Now maybe, it was a blessing in disguise that the Supreme Court early this year, declared that the EDCA should be a mere Executive Agreement, and not a treaty. Be that as it may, being a mere executive agreement, is it a stroke of luck that EDCA may now be easier for our incoming president and chief executive to abrogate should he decide, after a review, that it is after all, an onerous executive agreement?

---

*\*The author, a Professor of Development Studies and Public Management at the University of the Philippines, has authored eight books on PH-US Relations and Philippine Foreign Policy and is currently vice chair of CenPEG and president of the Philippine Anti-Imperialist Studies (PAIS).*