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**Return to Clark Air Force Base: Establishing Permanent
Military Bases in the Philippines as part of the United States
Grand Strategy in the South China Sea**

by

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Abstract

There are global strategic hotspots around the world the US is concerned about in which conflict at those locations could disrupt world stability. One location is the South China Sea. With the rise of China and the contested waters by neighboring nations the potential for conflict has increased over the years. The US should be concerned but also should look at this as an opportunity. The overall intent of the paper is to advocate the US reestablishment of permanent military bases in the Philippines. This will in turn formalize an enduring relationship between the US and Philippines while concurrently providing a credible deterrent against China. This paper analyzes the South China Sea's strategic importance, and Chinese and American grand strategy in the region. This will set the foundation of the strategic picture with which to frame the Philippines' South China Sea concerns and why it is now attempting to actively deter China. This paper will provide justification for why the US and the Philippines have an enduring relationship and how permanent US military bases will solidify that relationship and provide a credible deterrent to China. Finally counter points will be presented to display other options that are being considered but in the end the evidence will prove the paper's advocacy correct.

Introduction

Despite the Cold War being over the US today is still a global power that is attempting to maintain the world order it created after World War Two. There are strategic locations that are key to maintaining that world order and one of them is the South China Sea. The South China Sea has been an important trading route throughout history; however, with the rise of China the US now has to confront its growing influence. Policy makers are in a constant debate on how to handle China's influence in the South China Sea and decisions range from limited action to openly challenging its growing influence. This paper proposes the US reestablish permanent military bases in the Philippines and formalize an enduring relationship similar to the ones that the US has with Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. The US needs to take advantage of the current positive relationship it has with the Philippines to solidify US commitment, influence and power in the South China Sea while displaying a credible deterrent against China.

Thesis

The South China Sea is an area of concern for the United States due to the numerous sea lanes, disputed resources and the rise of China's influence in the region. The Philippines is an important partner for the United States in maintaining stability in the South China Sea. The United States needs to reestablish permanent military bases and formalize an enduring relationship with the Philippines as a part of its grand strategy in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea's Strategic Importance

Throughout history the South China Sea has been an important part of the economies in that region and the world. Before the modern era Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipinos used the South China Sea for fishing and the area was a heavily traveled trade route that brought new cultures to the region from India and the Middle East.¹ A key geographic feature in the South

China Sea is the Parcels and Spratly Islands that were a navigational concern to ancient traders.² In the 1930's as the French continued to grow their influence in the region they occupied the islands and then during World War Two the Japanese did.³ After the war both island chains were abandoned; however, since that time all the island chains have been occupied and claimed by different powers.⁴ Islands that were just navigational concerns throughout most of history have now become a source of strategic friction.

Six modern states border the South China Sea: Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. And they all view the South China Sea as a key strategic interest. Within the South China Sea there are five straits that house congested shipping lanes that are key to global trade. Furthermore, South China Sea fishing has become a major industry. China's fishing industry alone reached over \$1.6 billion while both Malaysia and the Philippines fishing industry is worth \$665 million.⁵ The fishing industry provides 25% of the protein to 500 million people in surrounding, nations making it a viable source of subsistence.⁶ Modern technology has been able to estimate that in the South China Sea there is potentially 125 billion barrels of oil and 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.⁷ Estimates have differed on the amount of oil and natural gas the South Chain Sea contains nevertheless no one disputes that there are large quantities of oil and natural gas reserves. Furthermore, each South China Sea nation claims deep historical foundations for their territorial claims on which fuels patriotic passions over disputes.⁸ Nationalism drives domestic political pressure for leaders not to waiver or appear weak in defending their territorial claims.⁹ With congested sea lanes, a massive fishing industry, potentially large amounts of oil and natural gas reserves and nationalist conflicts over territory the South China Sea's strategic importance is not disputed.

China's South China Sea Grand Strategy

China is following a dual path of cooperation and escalation in which one can deduce its actual South China Sea strategy is of delaying. Delaying enables China to make aggressive moves then take a pause to either maintain claims through diplomacy or wait till such time that its military situation improves and win by armed hostility.¹⁰ Chinese leaders' rhetoric has provided hints as to China's ultimate strategic objectives in the region. The idea of the "China Dream" has been advocated which means that China's grand strategy is to become the dominant regional power; to achieve this one of the contested areas that needs to be resolved is the South China Sea.¹¹ Furthermore, in 2010 the New York Times reported the Chinese leadership has stated that the South China Sea is a core interest.¹² China's interest in the South China Sea is not debatable but if their interest will lead for a push to become a regional hegemon is.

China's South China Sea actions and claims have given the indication that it wants to spread its influence in the area. In the realm of escalation China, in the 1970s, pushed for control of the Parcel islands which led to clashes with South Vietnamese forces but after the Vietnam War ended Vietnam recognized China's right to control the Parcel islands.¹³ In the 1980s China moved to occupy more reefs which brought on more clashes with Vietnamese forces and in the 1990s China started its claim to the Spratly islands and the Mischief Reef.¹⁴ In 2009 China claimed the nine dash line which encompasses over 65% of the total area of the South China Sea.¹⁵ In 2012 the Chinese took the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines after a military standoff and currently China is constructing seven artificial islands on the Spratly islands that can support military facilities and airfields.¹⁶ China has made numerous strategic aggressive moves over the last 50 years and in addition is modernizing a military to support its aggressive policy.

In the 1990's China started a military buildup which was influenced by the US victory in the 1991 Gulf War.¹⁷ Part of their buildup is modernization of anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles and numerous naval ships including cruisers and destroyers.¹⁸ China's 2015 military strategy displays an emphasis on maritime policy with statements concerning deep ocean defense.¹⁹ Part of their deep ocean defense strategy is based partly on sea lanes and their perceived vulnerability. China imports more than 85% of its oil through the Strait of Malacca.²⁰ Chinese leaders understand the powerful US navy can seize control of their vital sea lines in which they have no capability to resist.²¹ They have made it clear they are developing a military that can conduct deep ocean and anti-access operations which could be used to defend its South China Sea possessions and vital sea lanes. While China has made aggressive strategic moves in the region and is conducting a military buildup it has also made non-confrontational moves in the region.

Between its aggressive moves China has also conducted diplomatic and economic objectives in the region. In 1995 China made diplomatic moves to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to decrease South China Sea tensions. These diplomatic moves led to the creation of the 2002 South China Sea declaration of conduct. The declaration includes "agreement by all parties to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat of force."²² China's negotiations on the code of conduct gives the appearance that it will pursue peaceful means to resolve disputes; however, the current aggressive movements and the prolonged code of conduct negotiations provides evidence to the contrary.

In the economic realm China has increased its trading relationship with the South China Sea nations emerging as one of the top trading partners next to Japan and the United States.²³

Exports from the South China Sea nations to China have risen from \$51 billion in 1996 to \$278 billion in 2006.²⁴ On the other hand, exports from China to those nations have risen to 19.4 percent of its total exports in 2006.²⁵ China while conducting aggressive moves has at the same time increased its economic ties with South China Sea nations which demonstrates that China is following a delaying grand strategy.

US Grand Strategy in Asia

The 2015 US National Security Strategy (NSS) is very clear on the US' objectives. First, the US wants to ensure access to cyber, space, air and oceans which allow the conduct of free trade.²⁶ Furthermore, the US supports freedom of navigation, in the air and on land, and the NSS states specifically in Asia the US will not accept any "coercion and assertive behaviors that threaten escalation."²⁷ Also the US supports the finalization of the South China Seas code of conduct between China and ASEAN.²⁸ A key part of US grand strategy is its rebalance to Asia by maintaining the security agreements with Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and the Philippines while at the same time supporting peaceful economic growth through institutions like ASEAN.²⁹

The US recognizes that China will be a part of Asia's future growth; however, China's perceived delaying strategy has lead the US to a strategy that prepares for both cooperation and escalation. First, the US is pursuing a cooperative relationship with China that will promote stability and prosperity in Asia.³⁰ Second, the US will maintain that China follows international law in maritime security.³¹ Third, the US will carefully watch China's military buildup.³² It is apparent that the US is keeping its strategic options open.

The Philippines and the South China Sea

The Philippines and China have recently been in conflict over South China Sea claims since the Filipino government has claimed the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which includes the Spratly Islands. In March 2011 Chinese naval ships harassed a Filipino seismic naval ship looking for natural gas deposits and in April 2012 a five month standoff took place over the Scarborough shoal.³³ These events along with others have led the Filipino leadership to conclude that China will use military means to enforce their South China Sea objectives.³⁴ At the same time China and the Philippines have increased their economic ties. Between 1996 and 2006 China has moved from the Philippines' 12th largest trading partner to the 3rd with increased trade from \$328 million to \$4.6 billion.³⁵ However, the Philippines has conducted a hedging strategy along with other ASEAN nations. ASEAN nations understand that a rising China is going to increase its influence in the region and they are not militarily strong enough to deter China through hard power. Their hedging strategy is to continue to engage China through diplomacy and economic ties while at the same time continuing to engage the US to provide security for the region.³⁶

Along with hedging the Philippines have used the rule of law and institutions to assist in its disputes with China. It believes the legal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) justified its EEZ claim.³⁷ Furthermore, the Philippines have signed the ASEAN code of conduct and attempts to use peaceful means to resolve disputes.³⁸ Following the disputes over the Mischief Reef and China's Spratly occupation the Philippines attempted to use rule of law and institutions as a means to confront what they saw as illegal actions. The attempt to use peaceful and institutional means has given the Philippines international support but in the end these attempts have yet to give a resolution.³⁹ Due to the

lack of movement on the negotiations by ASEAN on the code of conduct and slow movement on the UNCLOS legal claims, the Philippines has chosen to augment its deterrence capability.⁴⁰

The increase of Chinese military aggression, lack of movement on its legal claims and increase domestic stability has convinced the Filipino government to pursue a strategy of modernizing its military to build a credible deterrent. Since the end of World War Two the Philippines faced internal threats that limited its ability to pursue a military build up to compete with outside aggression. With assistance from the US the Filipino government has fought a campaign to bring domestic stability. The main internal threat has been the Filipino Communist Party and they have conducted an insurgency since the 1960s.⁴¹ At the height of the Communist Party's power it had over 40,000 members but due to an intense counter-insurgency campaign the party has been reduced to less than 5,000 members, is disorganized and now has been weakened to the point that it is reduced to conducting low level propaganda and extortion schemes.⁴² The Philippines also faced a movement by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MNLF) whose goal is to create an Islamic state in the southern Philippines. After years of fighting and over 100,000 people killed the MNLF signed a peace treaty with the Filipino government in 1996.⁴³ However, two splinter groups were formed out of MNLF; the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Moro National Liberation Front (MILF). The ASG are radical members of the MNLF and conducted many bombings and hostage taking in the 1990s then became a major internal threat in the early 2000's.⁴⁴ A Philippine and US counter-insurgency campaign has reduced ASG power to a mere 70-100 members.⁴⁵ Similar to the MILF the MNLF signed a treaty in 2014; however, the negotiations took 17 years.⁴⁶

With reduced domestic security concerns President Aquino and the Filipino government have started to look to external threats and have started to develop a credible deterrent which is

directed at the growing military strength of China. Filipino President Aquino has increased spending to pursue a military modernization program but based on China's vast resources and speed of their military modernization program the increased military spending may not be enough.⁴⁷ There are creative options available to the Philippines to build a credible deterrent. They can save money and time by leasing military hardware from other countries or can pursue a mobile defensive missile defense system that could protect the EEZ.⁴⁸ However, in the end the Philippines cannot keep pace with China's military modernization therefore the Philippines best option is continuing to build military relationships with the US.

The US-Philippine Relationship

The US and Philippines strategic relationship started after the US' victory against Spain in 1898. The Treaty of Paris ended the war with the US annexing the Philippines.⁴⁹ From 1899 to 1902 the US conducted a military operation to subjugate the Philippine insurrection.⁵⁰ The Philippines became a US colony until World War Two when the Japanese occupied the Philippines from May 1942-Aug 1944. In 1946 the US acknowledged Filipino independence and in 1951 signed a mutual defense agreement that the US still honors today.⁵¹ Since Filipino independence the strategic relationship has gone through different phases. From 1956-1992 the relationship was transactional.⁵² A transactional relationship is based on the other country giving military access to the US for benefits.⁵³ The benefits can range from trade deals, military equipment sales or direct payments; in addition the host country could use an international crisis and embellish domestic resistance to increase the benefits it receives.⁵⁴ Due to the 1947 Military Bases Agreement during the Cold War the Philippines was host to one of the largest overseas US Air Force bases and the largest US Naval overseas base.⁵⁵ Clark Air Base and Subic Bay would play a significant role in the Vietnam War and was a key piece in the US Cold War deterrence

strategy. In 1992 the Filipino Senate did not renew the Military Bases Agreement and both Clark Air Base and Subic Bay were closed.⁵⁶ From 1992-2001 the US and Philippines Strategic relationship became less important as the US dealt with the Post-Cold War world while the Philippines continued to combat its domestic threats. However, in 1998 the US and the Philippines did sign a Visiting Force Agreement allowing the US military to use the Philippines for training and joint activities. The 9/11 attacks would reenergize the US and Philippines Strategic relationship.

From 2001 to today the US and the Philippines have had a mutual defense relationship. A mutual defense relationship is where the host nation welcomes a peacetime military agreement since both parties share a common threat.⁵⁷ Even though this relationship is stable there is a possible negative effect if the US attempts to use military forces for other purposes than against the mutual threat since it could face increased host nation domestic resistance and be asked to depart.⁵⁸ The common threat for the US and the Philippines has been terrorism. After 9/11 President Arroyo quickly stated her support for the US War on Terror.⁵⁹ President Arroyo faced by increasing domestic instability from MNLF and ASG saw this as an opportunity to receive US support in quelling those terrorist groups. Having a shared threat the US sent in a small force to the Philippines to conduct Foreign Internal Defense Operations and increased its economic and military aid.⁶⁰ To further military cooperation, in 2002 both countries joined in creating a Bilateral Defense Policy Board made up of military and civilian leadership to coordinate military issues to avoid any misunderstandings that could jeopardize the alliance.⁶¹ As stated before the Philippines were able to reduce the MNLF and ASG threat; thus in February 2015 Joint Operations Task Force-Philippines was shut down and the US left a small military footprint to ensure that both the MNLF and ASG threat stays manageable.⁶²

Even though the mutual defense relationship is strong there is another level of strategic relationship; an enduring one. The enduring relationship is where the host nation allows a US military presence when the initial threat that began the alliance disappears and the host nation leadership believes that US military presence brings stability.⁶³ NATO is an example of an enduring relationship even though Russia is becoming an increased threat once again. The time has come for both the US and the Philippines to recognize their enduring relationship. In 2003 the Bush Administration recognized the Philippines as a major non-NATO ally.⁶⁴ According to a 2014 poll 92 percent of Filipinos have a favorable view of the US.⁶⁵ The Philippines Supreme Court approved the Enhance Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).⁶⁶ This ended a political battle that was being waged between the senate and President Aquino.⁶⁷ The EDCA allows US military forces to be stationed in the Philippines on a rotational basis.⁶⁸ It was debatable whether the senate would have approved the EDCA had the Supreme Court ruled that it was a treaty. However, the EDCA approval did end a key obstacle to enduring ties between the Philippines and the US. All the enduring relationship ingredients are now present and their relationship has remained strong for over one hundred years thus making the Philippines “the oldest treaty ally in Asia”.⁶⁹ The next step of solidifying their enduring relationship is for the US to again establish permanent military bases.

Logic of Permanent US Military Bases in the Philippines

Establishing permanent US military bases in the Philippines is the final piece solidifying their enduring relationship and will provide a credible deterrent against China. As stated earlier the Philippines cannot match China’s military modernization program and needs outside assistance to build a credible deterrent. The EDCA is a first step in the establishment of military bases by allowing a permanent US military presence on Filipino soil. Another step needed is

adequate base facilities. After the US departed in 1992 the Filipino government turned Subic bay into an economical zone thus ensuring use of base facilities.⁷⁰ Since 9/11 the US military has used Subic Bay's commercial facilities for supplies and fuel and in May 2015 the Filipino government decided to reuse Subic Bay as a military installation.⁷¹ The foundations of reconstituting old US military installations like Clark Air Base and Subic Bay have begun which will make it easier and less costly for US forces to be permanently stationed in the Philippines.

As mentioned before the Chinese are modernizing their military with a deep ocean and anti-access mindset. The US needs to build a credible deterrent in the South China Sea and if conflict did breakout it will need the ability to react quickly to either defuse the situation or protect its allies. A permanent military base would increase the US' ability to do both. For deterrence activities a base would provide surveillance, presence and readiness. Surveillance could be conducted by permanently assigned aircraft with the ability for longer loiter times over all five South China Sea straits.⁷² Permanent military installations would increase presence through large shipyards, storage of fuel and munitions, aircraft maintenance facilities, and large airfields.⁷³ Readiness is improved by constant US and Filipino through, more frequent exercises, joint planning sessions and possible development of a joint command structure.⁷⁴ If deterrence fails and conflict begins the US, by having surveillance, presence and readiness would be in a better position to respond quickly to a crisis. Furthermore, distance would not be a disadvantage; for example Subic Bay is 128 miles from Scarborough Shoal.⁷⁵ Permanent US military bases enhance the US' ability to rapidly project military power in the South China Sea, providing a credible deterrent against China. They would signal that the US is fully committed to the Philippines and the region, thus illustrating to allies and China alike that American military might is there to ensure peace, stability and international law.

Since the end of World War Two the US has included the spread and promotion of values as a key strategic interest. The Philippines have demonstrated that they have not only embraced democracy, human rights, and the rule of law but lived them for many decades. The US can display its commitment to values to the world and the Philippines by recognizing that an enduring relationship exists based on not just history and threats but by shared values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Permanent US military bases in the Philippines would codify their enduring relationship.

Alternatives and Risks

An argument can be made that the rhetoric that China is challenging US power in Asia is exaggerated and is based on a Cold War mentality.⁷⁶ Chinese leaders understand that confronting the US would undermine its ability to resolve its domestic challenges and that they benefit from the US economic order.⁷⁷ If this is true then Chinese leaders are following the advice of their late leader Deng Xiaoping's axiom "not to treat the US as an adversary".⁷⁸ If a peaceful rise is China's grand strategy then there is no need for the US to further increase South China Sea military ties, rather it should focus on continuing to build a lasting partnership with China.

Another credible argument against reestablishing permanent US bases in the Philippines is why build up a US military presence in the Philippines when a better alternative is Guam? Some claim that Guam should be "America's Asian Anchor."⁷⁹ Since World War Two Guam has been built up into an island with a massive amount of military installations that can serve as a deep water port, an airlift hub and support large bomber aircraft.⁸⁰ Even though Guam has established military installations similar to the Philippines both are in range of Chinese surface

and submarine launched missiles.⁸¹ Supporters of Guam basing state that since the island is almost an even distance to Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China and the South China Sea that US military forces stationed at Guam can respond to any possible Asian conflict scenario.⁸² However, they also recognize distance is a major disadvantage to US military crisis response since Guam is 1379 nautical miles from Subic Bay and over 1612 Nautical miles from China.⁸³ The Guam option would eliminate any possible host nation political resistance to US bases; however, since 92 percent of Filipinos have a favorable view of the US and their supreme court has ruled in favor of the EDCA it is evident the Filipino public and political support of US presence is concrete thus making this Guam advantage null.

China's escalating South China Sea moves could be explained through a security dilemma lens. A security dilemma is when two sides without hostile intent are confused on the true nature of each of their actions that drives mistrust and regardless of benevolent explanations they view each other's strategic actions as offensive.⁸⁴ The uncertainty on what strategic path China is taking drives the US and its allies to strengthen security relationships and military partnerships. The US explains their strategic moves are to maintain stability and free flow of commerce⁸⁵ However, the security dilemma carries inherent risk to US military buildup in the Pacific since China views the US rhetoric of the rebalance to the Pacific as a military plan to limit Chinese power and growth.⁸⁶ Any increase in US military presence in the Pacific, regardless of the location, could be viewed as offensive.

Other South China Sea basing options like Vietnam would be impractical due to the cost of building or updating military installations to house US forces, the need for negotiating new treaties or agreements, the possibility of shared values may or may not exist at least not at the level it is with the Philippines. There is a high risk that China would view US partnering with an

unusual ally as a massive military escalation. Based on the positive and negatives of US South China Sea basing options the Philippines is the most logical and practical choice.

Conclusion

The South China Sea will continue to be of strategic importance to neighboring nations and the world. The question of whether the rise of China will lead to escalation or cooperation will not be answered soon. This will keep the South China Seas nations down a path of hedging and the US to keep its strategic options open. Both the Philippines and the US can take advantage of this opportunity to advance their relationship and finally recognize that over the last 100 years both nations have been partners and have an enduring relationship. The next step in their relationship is establishing permanent US military bases in the Philippines which would provide a credible deterrent against China and solidify their enduring relationship. There are arguments and risks to permanent US military bases in the Philippines; however, the risks are worth accepting. As the pages of history continue to turn, will history record this time as the moment that the US and the Philippines took advantage of the situation or will it record a missed opportunity?

Notes

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