

Past and present: America's repossession of the Philippines

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As the US dramatically expands its military presence, colonialist history is repeating itself.

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When the news broke in early February that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. had struck a deal to [allow the United States](#) to dramatically expand its military presence on the archipelago, many people reacted with surprise. After all, the US military's relationship to the Philippines is a politically sensitive subject, and Marcos had made noises about staying out of the rapidly escalating conflict between the US and China that is fueling Washington's buildup in the region.

The announcement of the deal - in which the US will be allowed to occupy four military bases in addition to the five it already operates - also came just a month after what was touted as a triumphant [visit by Marcos to Beijing](#), where he reportedly secured \$22.8 billion in [investment pledges](#) and exchanged warm words with President Xi Jinping.

But those who have followed the Marcos family's relationship with the US, or, indeed, the long saga of American intervention in the Philippines, were hardly surprised. The deal was less a bold break with the status quo than a reminder of a colonial relationship - first explicit, and then implicit - that has existed now for over a century.

When the US annexed the Philippines at the end of the 19th century, it was mainly because of the opportunity the archipelago provided for projecting American naval power onto the vast Asian land mass. The military bases Washington established in the country became the most visible evidence of continuing US presence after the country became nominally independent in 1946 and they spawned a nationalist movement seeking their withdrawal, which took place in the early 1990s. Since then, the US has been finding new ways to maintain its influence, and it is now announcing that it is back - with a vengeance. It all amounts to nothing less than the American repossession of the Philippines, nearly 130 years after the US first took control of the islands.

The deal also heralds the return of another long-running thread in Filipino history: the close and complex ties between the US state and the Marcos family.

For reasons both personal, political, and financial, Marcos, Jr, has a strong stake in not alienating Washington, even if that means giving the Pentagon an even greater ability to run the show in his country.

Geography is destiny

It is just the Philippines' bad luck that Marcos is president at a time when Washington is intent on maximizing the country's strategic value.

If geography is indeed destiny, the Philippines is Exhibit A. Perhaps no one captured its enduring geopolitical value better than General Arthur MacArthur, father of the more famous Douglas, who led the American expedition that subjugated the country in 1899. The Philippines, the elder MacArthur wrote,

"... is the finest group of islands in the world. Its strategic location is unexcelled by any other position in the globe. The China Sea, which separates it by something like 750 miles from the continent, is nothing more nor less than a safety moat. It lies on the flank of what might be called several thousand miles of coastline; it is the center of that position. It is therefore relatively better placed than Japan, which is on a flank, and therefore from the other extremity; likewise India, on another flank. It affords a means of protecting American interests which with the very least output of physical power has the effect of a commanding position in itself to retard hostile action."

These words have a very contemporary ring as the Philippines once again becomes a key pawn in Washington's increasingly militarized strategy to contain China.

Both Manila and Washington maintain the fiction that the recently-announced deal does not create US bases but rather provides Washington with "[access to Philippine bases](#)." (The five bases that the US already controls are also administered under this technicality.) This charade is necessary since Article XVIII, Section 25, of the Philippine Constitution, which was adopted in 1987 following the ouster of the elder Marcos, states that "foreign military bases, troops, or facilities shall not be allowed in the Philippines except under a treaty duly concurred in by the Senate." Moreover, cloaking the bases as Philippine bases means the US does not have to pay for them, bringing the country back to the early 1970's when Washington maintained the sprawling Clark Air Force Base and the strategically located Subic Naval Base, along with a number of smaller military facilities Base, without compensating the Philippines.

The reestablishment of foreign bases on Philippine soil has puzzled many, who still have vivid images of the hasty US exit from the massive Subic and Clark bases in 1991-92. While that departure, which supposedly [marked the end](#) of the American military presence in the region, has been largely attributed to the Philippine Senate's rejection of the basing agreement negotiated between Washington and the administration of the late president Corazon Aquino, three other factors played a role.

One was the eruption of the volcano Mount Pinatubo in 1991, which Washington saw as severely disrupting operations at Subic and Clark - both of which were located quite close to the volcano. Another was the collapse of the Soviet Union that same year, which led to the removal of the Soviet Pacific fleet as a major competitor to American naval power in the area. A third was the de facto alliance between China and Washington, a key element of which was Deng Xiao Ping's policy of adopting a low military profile and focusing on economic development with the help of American capital.

These considerations all contributed to Washington's decision to put a cap on the rent it was willing to pay to retain the bases, leading many Philippine senators to reject the deal out of national pride.

The South China Sea chessboard

It was during this same period - the early 1990s, which were marked by Washington's complacency towards the Philippines - that China began to make its moves in the South China Sea. The most significant step was the creeping occupation of Mischief Reef, which lay within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines, under the pretext of building "wind shelters" for Chinese fishermen. It was most likely the increased Chinese activity in the area, along with the sharpening of the China-Taiwan conflict in 1995 and 1996, that motivated the US to reestablish an active military presence in the Philippines.

In 1998, the US and the Philippines signed a [new Visiting Forces Agreement](#) (VFA), which provided for the periodic deployment of thousands of US troops to participate in military exercises with their Filipino counterparts.

This was followed by what eventually became a permanent deployment of US Special Forces in the Southern Philippine island of Basilan as part of President George W Bush's War on Terror. Like foreign bases, foreign troops were constitutionally banned from being permanently stationed in the Philippines, so to get around the ban, the Special Forces and other US troops were portrayed as being in the country on a "rotational basis," in order to engage in exercises with Filipino troops and provide them with "technical advice," and without authority to use firearms except in self-defense.

China's territorial incursions became bolder and more frequent in the 2000's and, in 2009, it [submitted](#) its controversial [Nine-Dash-Line map](#) to the United Nations. The map claims as Chinese territory some 90% of the South China Sea, including significant sections of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ's) of five Southeast Asian states: Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines.

Things came to a head during the administration of the late president Benigno Aquino III, who served from 2010 to 2016. Chinese coast guard vessels began aggressively driving off Filipino fishermen from their traditional fishing grounds. One of the richest of these was Scarborough Shoal, some 138 miles from the Philippines - in other words, firmly within the country's 200-mile EEZ. After a two-month-long confrontation between Chinese and Philippine vessels in 2012, the Chinese ended up [seizing the shoal](#).

Aquino's response was twofold. The first was to [elevate the issue to the Permanent Court of Arbitration](#) in the Hague, which eventually declared [China's claims invalid](#). Not surprisingly, China did not recognize the PCA's ruling. But the Aquino administration's more consequential move was to enter into the [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#) (EDCA) with the Obama administration.

The agreement places no limits on the number of bases, weaponry, and troops that the US could have in the country, though it explicitly bans bringing in nuclear weapons. Presented as an executive agreement and not as a treaty, the deal drew anger from nationalists who demanded Senate concurrence. The Supreme Court sided with the government, however, ruling that the deal was not a treaty and thus did not need Senate approval.

The Duterte interlude

President Rodrigo Duterte's election in 2016 was heralded as bringing about a major shift in US-Philippine relations. Duterte moved closer to China, downplaying the significance of the Hague ruling and refusing to take up the cudgels for Filipino fishermen chased off from their traditional fishing grounds by Chinese Coast Guard vessels. He also successfully promoted a populist [anti-American image](#) by harnessing the undercurrent of resentment at colonial subjugation that has always coexisted with the admiration of the US in the Filipino psyche.

For all his anti-American posturing, though, Duterte was more bark than bite. He did not interfere with the close relationship between the US and Philippine militaries, which came into play when US Special Forces assisted Philippine troops in the bloody retaking of the southern city of Marawi from Muslim fundamentalists in 2017. Nor did he [ever follow through](#) on his vow in 2020 to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement.

Indeed, by the end of his term, Duterte was extolling the VFA, [voicing approval of the AUKUS](#) security pact joining Australia, Britain, and the United States, reestablishing the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, and launching expanded joint military exercises with the US. While not repudiating his close relationship with China, Duterte ended his presidency in June 2022 on a cordial note with Washington that contrasted sharply with the bitter row with Barack Obama that launched his term.

China's lesson from Taiwan Straits crisis

Chief among the issues fueling the American buildup in the Philippines is the unresolved status of Taiwan, at the northern edge of the South China Sea.

While the United States recognized Beijing as the sole government of China in 1979, it nevertheless committed itself to continue arms sales to Taiwan - and left deliberately (or as some put it, "strategically") ambiguous what the United States would do if China were to forcibly assert its sovereignty over the island.

While Beijing considers its sovereignty over Taiwan non-negotiable, its strategy has been to promote cross-straits economic integration as the main mechanism that would eventually lead to reunification. In Taiwan, however, being tough on Beijing plays well with voters, and nothing plays better than the threat to declare formal independence or assume the trappings of a sovereign power. When Taiwanese leaders display such behavior, Beijing has felt compelled to put them in their place. In certain circumstances, Beijing has gone beyond words and resorted to sending missiles to the waters around Taiwan. Taiwan President Lee Teng Hui's visit to the United States in 1995 was one such occasion, as was, more recently, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. While both events created diplomatic crises, the first had momentous strategic consequences.

In 1995, China launched missile drills to teach Taiwan a lesson following Lee's US visit. It did so again in 1996 after Taiwan held its first democratic presidential election. The Clinton administration responded by sending two supercarriers, the USS Independence and the USS Nimitz, to the Taiwan Straits in March 1996. This was the biggest display of US power in the region since the Vietnam War - and it was intended to underline Washington's determination to defend Taiwan by force. Washington's intervention was cold water splashed on Beijing's face, for it revealed just how vulnerable the coastal region of east and southeast China, the industrial heart of the country, was to

US naval firepower.

It was this realization that prompted the change in China's strategy which has been unfolding over the next two decades. As analyst Gregory Poling notes, "One can draw a straight line from the PLAN's [People's Liberation Army Navy] humiliation in 1996 to its near peer status with the US Navy today."

Overall, China's strategic posture remains defensive, but in the East and South China Seas, it began a "tactical offensive" aimed at enlarging its defense perimeter against US naval and air power. Defense analyst Samir Tata writes: "As a land power, the Middle Kingdom does not have to worry about the unlikely possibility of a conventional American assault on the mainland via amphibious landing by sea, parachuting troops by air, or an expeditionary force marching through a land invasion route. What it is vulnerable to is US control of the seas outside China's 12-nautical mile maritime boundaries. From such an over-the-horizon maritime vantage point, the US Navy has the capability to cripple Chinese infrastructure along the eastern seaboard by long-range shelling, missiles, and unmanned aerial bombing."

In response to this dilemma, the Chinese have evolved a strategy of "forward edge" defense consisting of expanding the country's maritime defense perimeter and fortifying islands - and other formations in the South China Sea that it now occupies or has seized from the Philippines - with anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile systems (A2/AD, or "anti-access/area denial" in military parlance) designed to shoot down hostile incoming missiles and aircraft in the few seconds before they hit the mainland. Though defensive in its strategic intent, what has enraged Beijing's neighbors is the unilateral way Beijing has gone about implementing A2/AD, with little consultation and in clear violation of such landmark agreements as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas.

Washington on the offensive

Beijing's unilateral acts in the South China Sea have provided ammunition for the US containment strategy towards China, which has been operative since the Obama years. But Washington's rhetoric now elicits worries among some ASEAN governments that they are being drawn into a regional confrontation that is not in their interest. Particularly alarming has been a recent leaked memo from General Mike Minihan, who heads up the US Air Mobility Command, declaring, "My gut tells me we will fight in 2025." Minihan, it bears noting, is not the first member of the US command to predict conflict with China in the immediate future. Adm. Michael M. Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations, said in October last year that the US should prepare to fight Beijing in 2022 or 2023. Even earlier, the head of the US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Philip Davidson, said that the Chinese threat to Taiwan would "manifest" in the next six years, by 2027.

Even without such statements, the level of hostile activity from all sides of the South China Sea dispute has been alarming. During a visit to Vietnam I made as a congressman in 2014, top Vietnamese officials expressed concern at how, owing to the lack of agreed rules of engagement, a collision by American and Chinese warships "playing chicken" - according to them a common occurrence - could immediately escalate to a more intense level of conflict.

Like the Philippines, Vietnam has criticized Beijing's moves, and its vessels have traded water cannon fire with Chinese Coast Guard ships in the South China Sea. The aggressive posture of the Biden administration, however, has led Hanoi to affirm a posture of neutrality in any brewing superpower confrontation. In a recent visit to Beijing, the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Truong, assured Chinese President Xi Jinping that his government would continue to hew to its "Four Nos" foreign policy approach in the region: that is, that Vietnam

would not join military alliances, not side with one country against another, not give other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries, and not use force – or threaten to use force – in international relations.

Blackmail as diplomacy

But the Philippines is not Vietnam and Marcos Jr. has no record of discerning the national interest in his years as a politician, much less advocating or standing up for it. On that front he even falls short of Duterte, who claimed he became a nationalist while in college in the 1960s.

What he's very conscious of, though, is how high the stakes are for himself and his family should he make the wrong decision in the intensifying conflict between Washington and Beijing.

Members of the Marcos dynasty are said to have been apprehensive about visiting the United States ever since they last left it in the early 1990s, when they'd come as exiles there following the uprising that ousted Ferdinand Marcos, Sr, in 1986. The reason is a standing \$353 million [contempt order against Marcos Jr.](#), related to a US court judgment awarding financial compensation from the Marcos estate to victims of human rights violations under the dictatorship. Ever since the contempt order was issued by the US district court in Hawaii in 2011, [Marcos has avoided](#) complying. A new judge extended the contempt order to January 25, 2031, which would render Marcos vulnerable to arrest anytime he visits the United States during his term, which ends in 2028.

Marcos also cannot be unaware of how the US, with its global clout, has often been able to freeze the assets of people linked to regimes considered undesirable by the US, the most recent example being the holdings of Russian oligarchs connected to President Vladimir Putin in the wake of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. The Marcos family has some \$5 to \$10 billion in landholdings and other assets distributed throughout the world in such places as California, Washington, New York, Rome, Vienna, Australia, Antilles, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Switzerland and Singapore. Being on the wrong side of the United States, especially in a dispute as central as the China-US conflict could have devastating financial consequences for the Marcos dynasty.

With this veritable sword of Damocles hanging over him, Marcos Jr., is not someone who would dare cross Washington. Indeed, when it comes to negotiating an independent path between two superpowers, he is the wrong person at the wrong place at the wrong time – which is another way of saying that from Washington's point of view, he's the right person at the right place at the right time.

Nearly 125 years since Admiral George Dewey made his grand entrance into Manila Bay, unleashing a chain of events that ended with the colonization of the country, the Philippines, thanks in no small measure to Marcos Jr., has returned to its unenviable status as a strategic possession of the United States.

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This article was first published on the *Nation* and we [Rappler] are republishing it with permission. Walden Bello is currently a visiting senior researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University and international adjunct professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. As a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines from 2009 to 2015, he authored two joint resolutions with the late nationalist Senator Miriam Santiago-Defensor seeking the abrogation of the US-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement.