

THE PHILIPPINES AND INDIA: STRATEGIC PARTNERS?

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Because of the volatility in the current world order, states are faced with the daunting task of continuously addressing new and emerging security challenges. These threats have the capacity to disrupt peace, security and stability. From the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East to the Ebola epidemic in Africa, they continue to evolve in ways that significantly tests on how states respond to them.

Asia is not exempt and it stands at the cusp of a regional transformation; it is accompanied by larger, strategic challenges. The Philippines and other ASEAN member states have been and are currently undergoing rapid political and economic changes.

As such, it is no longer enough to establish cordial and friendly state-to-state relations. Multilateral approach to solving political, economic and socio-cultural conundrums have been part and parcel of foreign policy in the last century. But due to various geo-political and geo-economic changes, strategic partnerships that go beyond regular bilateral relations are being considered by various states to address these emerging regional challenges.

There have been debates on what essentially constitutes a strategic partnership. While strategic partnerships and alliances have often been used interchangeably, both differ in its core objective. On the one hand, alliances connote a security-oriented, binding political and legal relationship between two states to achieve a specific objective usually directed at a third party or state. While it also contains security and defense clause, a strategic partnership, on the other hand, is geared towards complementing the strengths of partner states, shoring up their weaknesses and working together towards a common goal.

Elevating relations: moving forward through strategic partnership

Given these challenges, the Philippines have been steadfastly developing its relations with many countries. But in the context of confronting regional political and security challenges, the Philippines must have foresight and expand its bilateral security relations aside from its traditional partners. In light of the fragile and tense situation in the region owing to the territorial and maritime tensions in the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea, some of the leaders at the ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting expressed serious concerns that land reclamation in the South China Seas has eroded trust and confidence and that may undermine peace, security and stability.

Both the Philippines and ASEAN have diversified and expanded their strategic interests leading them to pursue and elevate their relations with other states. Other powers such as Australia and India are active partners of ASEAN in addressing the gamut of traditional and non-traditional issues in the region and it would be prudent for the Philippines to reexamine and strengthen its relations with them and the feasibility of pursuing a strategic partnership with these states.

India as a strategic partner

The Philippines and India share convergent values and ideals, and has cooperated on many international and regional platforms. The Philippines and India established diplomatic relations in 1949, yet despite this long-standing partnership, it lacks depth compared to Philippine relations with Japan and South Korea.

As a growing political and economic power, India can share and provide expertise on defense and security issues. It has one of the blue water navies in the world with the capability of exercising sea control at wide ranges. As the world's fifth largest navy, India has two aircraft carriers, 136 ships, 19 submarines, and more than 100 helicopters excluding a host of warships under construction with improved stealth features and weapons that will soon be added to its fleet.

The Philippines and India have already laid the foundation for defense and security cooperation through the Memorandum of Agreement on Defense and Security signed in 2006 covering the following areas: 1) Defense Cooperation 2) Defense Technology Cooperation, and 3) Other Defense Related Activities. Different facets of the MOA on Defense and Security Cooperation have been implemented through the exchange visits of high government officials, friendly port visits of Indian warships to the Philippines and military training and education between Filipino and Indian military personnel.

In pursuing a strategic partnership with India, the Philippines may look to Vietnam as an example, which elevated its bilateral relations to a strategic partnership with India in 2007. According to former Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, continuous high-level visits have played a vital role in consolidating and strengthening relations between the two countries. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi actively meeting his foreign counterparts, the Philippines should make a concerted effort in reaching out to India to usher in a new chapter in deepening its relations. Because of this development, a high-level visit or a state visit between the two countries could provide a proper platform for converging mutual interests to advance bilateral relations.

But with uncertainty looming over the maritime and territorial disputes in the region, there is a need for the Philippine-Indian defense relations to go beyond port visits and consultations to something more significant such as increasing the number of military exchanges, naval trainings, or even intelligence sharing and possibly expanding its scope.

The Philippines may also benefit from India's advanced defense technologies through technology transfer and procurement of defense equipment. With the Department of National Defense implementing the Philippine Defense Reform Program, an increase in military and naval exchanges would contribute in elevating defense competence and capability amidst current and emerging security threats. With its technical capabilities in the maritime domain, India may share its expertise in areas such as ship building and repairs. It can also participate in maritime patrol activities and naval exercises. In addition, a potential maritime cooperation between the Philippines and India will also aid in securing of sea-lanes, promoting anti-piracy, preventing water pollution, and strengthening search and rescue operations in open seas.

A much-needed boost

A strategic partnership may give the needed boost to deepen Philippine-India relations and serve as a catalyst for strengthening cooperation especially in the defense and security arena. On the other hand given that a strategic partnership may be too ambitious in the context of Philippine-India relations, the Philippines may opt to deeply engage India in more concrete ways and let the relations flourish from there.

A strategic partnership does not necessarily aim to counter a third party nor sideline its traditional partners. A deepened and extensive collaboration and cooperation with India especially in defense and security, through exchange and sharing of best practices and acquisition of naval and maritime expertise, training and equipment will strengthen the country's defense capabilities. This capability will not only serve the country well in facing current security and regional challenges but also emerging threats in the years to come. ❀

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