

## THE PHILIPPINES AND RUSSIA: PROSPECTS FOR SECURITY COOPERATION

*by Carlos D. Sorreta and Fe T. Apon*

A discussion of the prospects of security cooperation between the Philippines and Russia is timely and perhaps even long overdue. Frank exchanges on this issue will certainly help identify the factors that have kept this security cooperation at the level where they are now and perhaps discover what can be done to boost cooperation in this important field.

An examination of the prospects of security cooperation between the Philippines and Russia will necessarily entail a close examination of the following:

- Russia has shown great initiative in engaging the region through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).
- Russia's attitude towards the most pressing security issue in the region, that of the conflicting claims in the South China Sea, would be most instructive, particularly in the context of Russia's close relations with China.
- Russia's role in the growing defense spending in the region and whether the Philippines could consider arms trade cooperation with Russia.
- Common interests in non-traditional security areas.

### **Regional Institutions**

The leading regional institution in the region is ASEAN—a child of the Cold War, born and bred with the objective of halting the spread of communism. ASEAN's members had then stood on opposite sides during the Cold War.

Today things are much different. Foreign Minister Lavrov perhaps said it best when he said “the new Russia is building its relations with Southeast Asia on a fundamentally different, ideology-free basis.”

This time around, Russia is not attempting to assert itself in the region through power and ideology. The preferred path is cooperation and active participation in the vibrant markets of East Asia—a strategy highlighted by Russia's APEC Chairmanship and hosting of the APEC Summit in Vladivostok in 2012.

Regional institutions in East Asia promote security primarily two ways: political dialogue and building economic prosperity.

In terms of security cooperation between the Philippines and Russia countries, there is much that can be done. Admittedly, Russia's natural partner in these regional fora is Vietnam, while for the Philippines it is the United States. But these should not be a hindrance to cooperation in key political groupings like the ARF, the EAS and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus process.

### **History Need Not Be a Barrier**

History need not be a barrier. Compared to other regions, East Asia is where there is least contention between the US and Russia. In fact, their cooperation in the Six-Party Talks seems far less problematic than in other parts of the world. As for the Philippines and Vietnam, our relations have matured and we find common cause on many crucial issues.

Could Russia play a more dramatic role in security in the context of these institutions? One possible area is for Russia to take a more active role in helping create the conditions where the nuclear powers can sign on to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Treaty. On this issue, the Philippines would gladly work closely with Russia.

### **The Situation in the South China Sea**

On the most pressing security issue in the region, that of the conflicting claims in the South China Sea, Russia has not taken sides—a sound and fair decision.

The economic and political dynamism in Asia and the region's transformation into the 21st century global center of gravity have created opportunities for both the Philippines and Russia.

However, the changing security environment in the Asia Pacific has also given rise to uncertainties, with the rise of China arguably being the main factor in the evolution of the region. In this regard, the Philippines and Russia share a common interest in ensuring China's peaceful rise.

The Philippine filing of the West Philippine Sea arbitration case and calls for prompt conclusion of a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea show our desire and commitment to establish a rules-based regional order and to find solutions based on transparency and diplomacy.

There must be an increase in the dialogue between Philippine and Russian policymakers and think tanks with the aim of clarifying the Philippine position on this issue—perhaps to the point that Russia could articulate general support for the decision taken by the Philippines to resort the dispute settlement mechanism enshrined in UNCLOS. This dialogue can be held even though China is Russia's main strategic partner in the region and they share substantial interests.

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Both Russia and China want a stable Central and East Asia. They want their 4,209 kilometer border secure. China has replaced Germany as Russia's largest trading partner. Russia is selling arms once again to China. China's moneyed investors have been looking at Russia.

All this would not necessarily translate to Russian support for China's efforts to claim the South China Sea. China clearly wants to be the dominant power in the region, something that could jeopardize Russia's efforts to engage the region and develop its Far East area.

The Russian International Affairs Council believes that Russia should implement flexible geo-political maneuvering in its relations with China. This would necessitate a careful balancing that requires Russia to maintain good relations with China while deepening ties with countries in the region that may have issues with China.

This is a good strategy and one that that the Philippines could support. It is a strategy that would require Russia not to take sides on who owns what, but would allow it to support actions that are based on the principles of international law and that reduce tensions.

### **Russian Arms Sales in the Region**

A good yardstick for measuring political tension is arms sales. Almost every East Asian country has embarked on huge military expansion, making it one of the fastest-growing regions for defense spending in the world.

Military analysts at IHS Jane's project ASEAN defense spending to reach \$40 billion in 2016. Defense spending by the South China Sea claimants is notable. Vietnam's arms imports tripled over the last four years, from \$300 million in 2009 to \$900 million last year. Defense industry experts believe Hanoi's imports will reach \$1.4 billion this year. Malaysia's budget for 2014 is US\$5.1 billion. From submarines, to ships, from frigates to fighters, much of this increase in arms in the region will be from Russian sources.

In March 2013, Russian and Chinese media reported that Beijing was acquiring significant quantities of advanced military equipment from Russia. Among the multi-billion dollar systems to be bought by the Chinese military are six Lada-class attack submarines and 35 SU-35 fighter jets. These acquisitions are significant because they are sophisticated systems and it has been more than a decade since China purchased any significant weapon systems from Moscow.

It has been reported that Russia has just delivered the second of six Kilo-class submarines it is selling to Vietnam. Defense Industry Daily has said that "Vietnam has reportedly ordered two more Gepard Class/Project 11661K frigates from Russia's Gorky Shipyard, which will bring their fleet to six."

While the Philippines has significantly increased its allocations for defense spending, the amount is still small compared to others in the region. The Philippines is also way behind in modern arms and must play catch up. This means that arms purchases must be carefully thought through. For example, new systems must work seamlessly with existing ones, as the Philippines cannot simply afford to invest in totally different

systems. New acquisitions must also be compatible with those of its only defense treaty ally, the United States.

Will there be opportunities for Russian arms sales to the Philippines? Perhaps not in the immediate future. The modern arms the Philippines seeks are unabashedly based on Western technologies.

The one major foray into Russian-based models was the purchase of eight Swidnik W-3A Sokol helicopters. But these did not live up to expectations and was made an example by President Benigno Aquino III of an irresponsible purchase by the defense department from the previous administration in his State of the Nation Address last year.

However, there are those who have noticed that Russia's defense industry has been purchasing Western defense technologies. After decades of self-reliance, Russia has in the past five years begun acquiring systems from abroad. For example, the Russian Navy purchased three landing ships from France, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Israel, and advanced communications equipment from Germany. Perhaps when Russian arms are more compatible to the systems the Philippines is using, then serious consideration can be given to these purchases.

There are, however, two clear advantages that Russian arms sales policies do have over the West. One, Russian arms are more competitively priced. The other is that little to no conditionalities are attached to these sales.

### **Bilateral Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security Issues**

Thankfully, there are areas of security cooperation between the Philippines and Russia where history and strategic partnerships do not stand in the way: non-traditional security cooperation.

#### *Energy Security Cooperation*

Energy security is of crucial importance for the Philippines and this is where cooperation with Russia is steadily increasing. Data from the Philippine Department of Energy show that during the first six months of 2013, the Philippines imported more than 25 percent of its crude oil requirement from Russia. Will this cooperation go beyond negotiating deliveries and include energy efficiency? Secretary del Rosario, during his 2012 visit to Russia, also invited Russian businessmen to invest in renewable energy. I believe this is an area that holds immense potential benefits for both the Philippines and Russia.

#### *Maritime Security, Disaster Relief*

The increased energy cooperation between our countries makes it imperative for both countries to explore ways of ensuring maritime security in the region. In this regard, discussion on functional areas of maritime cooperation, such as safety and freedom of navigation, incidents at sea, marine environment preservation and humanitarian and disaster relief can be started.

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*Transnational crime and extremism*

The Philippines' porous borders and the prevailing socio-economic conditions render it vulnerable to international criminal and extremist groups. Many Filipinos have become easy targets for international human and drug trafficking rings as well as recruitment by extremists. Russia has similar problems and also has an interest in tackling these transboundary challenges.

*Intelligence Cooperation*

Both countries are poised to reinvigorate their security cooperation through the conclusion of an agreement between their National Security Councils. Negotiations through exchanges of drafts have been going on for four years and there is now a good possibility that this agreement will be formalized soon.

**Room to Grow**

At present, because of the security circumstances and history of each country, the Philippines and Russia benefit more from cooperation with other partners than with each other. However, a pragmatic consideration of the two countries' interests and capacities would offer great potential benefits in the area of security cooperation.

To a certain extent, the developments in Ukraine and the resulting measures imposed by Western countries aimed at isolating Russia could serve as a powerful incentive for it to further deepen its engagement with Asia, including the Philippines. 🌸

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