

CHAPTER 5

The Philippines in 2017: Security Challenges in a Time of Conflict & Change

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Introduction

Security issues remained at the top of the political agenda of the Philippines for the year 2017. The government led by President Rodrigo Duterte continued to steer the course it set last year of addressing security challenges both at home and abroad. His government remains steadfast in carrying out its bloody war on drugs despite widespread overseas condemnation and its many fatalities. But this year also ushered a new front in Duterte's war against the republic's security threats. The siege of Mindanao's Marawi City in September was the definitive security-related event for the country and the region in 2017. The lingering terrorist presence in southern Philippines manifested itself once again through the Maute group and their links with the Islamic State (IS). Finally, the year 2017 was a historical landmark for the Philippines as it chaired the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and hosted its summits. This was an opportunity for the Duterte administration to set the regional security agenda and rally neighbors and dialogue partners to collectively address regional security issues such as the North Korea threat, the future of multilateralism, terrorism, maritime disputes, and uncertainty stemming from power shifts in the Asia-Pacific.

To a large extent, a large portion of the Filipino public remained supportive of Duterte's focus on security issues given its critical importance in fostering political stability necessary for economic development.¹ At the same time, however, Duterte's campaign has resulted in the rise of new threats and issues that have complicated the country's security situation. Although these security threats have been brewing for several years, it remains to be seen whether the president's hardline approach can result in good and sustainable outcomes. A crucial factor is to what extent domestic political issues could distract the government in the pursuit of these security goals.

¹ "SWS: Duterte's netsatisfaction ratings up by 10 points in Q4 of 2017," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 22, 2017.

As Duterte is often painted as a populist leader with an adversarial leadership style, the nation could potentially fall within the trap of pernicious polarization. In the years to come, it is still uncertain whether the firebrand president can deliver his promise of meaningful and positive change for the Filipino people or will the Philippines remain beleaguered by problems of insecurity, poverty, and instability.

The Blood War on Drugs: Violent yet Popular

Already on its second year, Duterte's infamous but domestically popular war on drugs has produced thousands of casualties. Just like what he promised during the election campaign, his anti-drug crusade continued to be relentless and violent. The spate of "extra-judicial killings" has been condemned by foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations, international media, and the domestic political opposition. Duterte's sensitivity to criticism from abroad has been noticeable and tends to define how his government treated those who opposed what he believes is the right approach to solving the drug problem. Apart from scathing responses and threats to cut relations, the Duterte government has also refused to accept foreign aid from the European Union given the latter's rebuke. Not all countries however have criticized the controversial drug war. Other countries such as China have provided assistance such as resources to build drug rehabilitation centers and light weapons to be used in illegal drug police operations. Given a mixed message from the international community, it is highly doubtful that Duterte's government will be deterred through sanctions and shameful criticism despite the impression of dangerous violence in the country that his drug war is creating.

Duterte's war on drugs has exposed the inadequacies and deficits of security sector governance in the Philippines. The police in particular, though civilianized since the return to democratic rule in 1986, is not professionalized enough to carry out the government's crusade against illegal drugs. The lack of training, resources, regard for human rights, and strict adherence to protocol and rules of engagement loomed large in the conduct of the war on drugs. Duterte sought the assistance of the military to fill the deficient capacities of the police but this particular security actor has resisted the invitation. The anomalous deaths of several minors have raised concern of the police's ability to proportionately dispense its responsibilities. The killings in Duterte's bloody war on drugs, originally promised to end within the first six months

of his presidency, relatively decreased in the last few months of the year. However, this does not mean that police operations will cease under the current administration whose prioritization of combatting criminality and illegal drugs is clearly seen in its National Security Policy document.²

The war on drugs however remains very popular among Filipinos. Despite apprehensions over the killings and the chilling effect over human rights, public opinion generally approves this approach so far. To date, the police has reported a decrease in crime but there has been no rigorous assessment of this policy nor an evidence-based metric to gauge success. Moreover, the government's law enforcement approach largely ignores the other dimensions of the illegal drugs problem such as public health, political economy, transnational crime, and regional cooperation.³ Without attention to these equally important aspects, the success of the drug war will be limited and therefore questioned. Filipinos tend to agree with the overriding goal of curbing criminality and illegal drugs but they also know that it warrants a more comprehensive and evolved approach that takes democracy and human rights into serious consideration. Without any major changes, Duterte's bloody war on drugs might ironically generate more public insecurity.

A War against Terrorism: Martial Law and the Marawi Tragedy

The attention of the Duterte administration in its war on drugs was diverted in May 2017 when a group of local terrorists led by the Maute group and forces linked with Isnilon Hapilon captured the Mindanao city of Marawi. The largest Muslim populated city in the country (400,000 people), Marawi is one of the major cities in conflict-ridden Mindanao whose last major attack by non-statutory armed groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters was during the 2013 siege of Zamboanga City.

The assault on Marawi was a wake-up call for the Philippines and the rest of the world regarding the long reach of IS. It also suggests that Southeast Asia remains a

² *Our National Security Policy for Change and Filipinos Well-Being (2017-2022)*. Quezon City: National Security Policy.

³ Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and Aries A. Arugay, "Duterte's War on Drugs: Bitter Lessons from Thailand's Failed Campaign," *The Conversation*, September 29, 2016. In <https://theconversation.com/dutertes-war-on-drugs-bitter-lessons-from-thailands-failed-campaign-66096>.

major front of global terrorism which can only be fully addressed through regional cooperation and assistance from other major countries. Duterte warned about the looming IS threat in the Philippines but his government failed to anticipate and adequately prepare for an imminent attack. The previous administration also dismissed the formal presence of IS in the Philippines. While there has been no factual evidence directly linking the Maute group and Hapilon with IS, the latter are bent on establishing an IS province (*wilayah*) in Mindanao. For decades, this part of the Philippines has been a fertile ground for violent extremism as well as has been the training ground and recruitment base for jihadists and terrorists. The goal of these groups is to convince IS regarding the potential of Mindanao as their hub in Southeast Asia.

The Duterte administration quickly responded with severe force. An executive order signed while the president was on an official state visit to Russia declared martial law to the entirety of Mindanao. This surprising and unprecedented decision stoked fears from Duterte's critics given its association with the Marcos dictatorship.⁴ Public opinion polls however revealed majority support for martial law.⁵ The Philippine Congress as well as the Supreme Court also overwhelmingly approved the declaration. For several months, a large military contingent was deployed and engaged the terrorists in protracted urban guerilla warfare. Around 400,000 residents were forced to flee the city resulting to massive displacement of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In the succeeding months, Marawi was pulverized to the ground as it looked like the decimated cities of Mosul, Aleppo, and Kandahar. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), not trained to fight in urban areas, battled the terrorist groups equipped with sophisticated weaponry and sufficient firepower. In the end, Duterte formally declared the liberation of Marawi on November 2017 but Mindanao will remain under martial law in 2018.

It is premature for the government to declare a complete triumph against IS-linked terrorist groups though their annihilation has provided the AFP a military victory. The war in Marawi produced more than 600 casualties but also important is the devastation it left behind. Estimates indicated that it will take US\$ 1 billion to

⁴ In 2009, President Gloria Arroyo declared martial law in the province of Maguindanao for a period of 9 days.

⁵ "Majority of Filipinos still favor extended Mindanao martial law —SWS survey," *GMA News Online*, November 11, 2017. In <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/632794/majority-of-filipinos-still-favor-extended-mindanao-martial-law-sws-survey/story/>.

rehabilitate the war-damaged city. This represents a major challenge for the Duterte administration that promised to uplift the lives of Filipinos, particularly those from the periphery. Post-war reconstruction needs to be swift but also strategic and sensitive to the needs of the people. There is also a need to investigate the other political personalities behind the Marawi siege and the involvement of local politicians in sowing terrorist activities. Duterte must not allow the tragedy of Marawi to become a rallying cause of more jihadist recruitment as well as add to the list of historical grievances that minority Muslims bear against the Philippine republic.⁶

The threat of terrorism only became more astute given the Marawi tragedy. There is little doubt that the way violence was deployed to neutralize the IS-sympathetic groups as well as any failures or delays in post-war reconstruction can be used as propaganda to recruit new members or bring other armed groups into the IS fold. Regional cooperation and assistance from other countries will be critical in the years to come. The trilateral agreement between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to collectively patrol maritime Southeast Asia as well as share intelligence was seriously put into force only after the threat of IS had become palpable. The assistance provided by other countries such as the United States (US) was instrumental but aid should not just be focused on defense cooperation and anti-terrorism initiatives. Other countries such as China and Japan have promised to help in the economic recovery of Marawi. This is of critical importance since it can address the deeper roots of terrorism and conflict: the lack of economic opportunities and the prevalence of social inequalities.⁷

As the Duterte administration is embarking on a more comprehensive and inclusive peace process with all secessionist and minority groups in the Mindanao, it is necessary that the lessons of Marawi are imbibed by the parties in the negotiating table and inform the new draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. This is a huge challenge for Duterte as his government is expected to spearhead the initiative to amend the 1987 Constitution primarily to adopt a federal system of government. To a large extent, the intertwined fates of the Mindanao conflict, the vulnerability of the Philippines to terrorist attacks, and Duterte's campaign for a more secure and stable country rest on how soon Marawi can get back on its feet.

⁶ "Duterte says Philippines won't be a regional center of ISIS," *Philippine Star*, December 20, 2017.

⁷ "China Gives New Equipment to Philippines for Marawi Recovery," *The Diplomat*, October 18, 2017; "Japan vows maximum aid for Marawi rehab," *Philippine Star*, October 30, 2017.

Playing Host: Regional Security and Duterte's Gambit

2017 marked a unique opportunity for the Philippines as it assumed the ASEAN chairmanship during its 50th anniversary with Duterte playing host to its member-states as well as the regional body's dialogue partners. Though many considered him a relative upstart in regional affairs, Duterte treaded a careful approach that accommodated the general interests of major powers without sacrificing ASEAN centrality. As Asia-Pacific remains confronted with a lot of strategic issues, the Philippines under Duterte performed a delicate balancing act that did not upset the status quo nor shamed specific countries.

On the one hand, many critics argued that Duterte lost an opportunity to substantively discuss post-arbitration maritime issues with China as well as rally other claimants to the South China Sea (SCS).⁸ On the other hand, some analysts appreciated the Filipino president's hedging approach as he rebuilt ties with China, fostered new relations with powers like Russia, India, Turkey, etc., but also remained committed to strengthening partnerships with old allies such as Japan, the US, Australia, and many others.⁹ Through a combination of unorthodox and acerbic rhetoric, serendipitous circumstances, and institutional commitments, it seemed like Duterte's high risk gambit has successfully accomplished turning the Philippines into a "normal" Southeast Asian country – one that attempts to balance competing powers in order to promote and defend its national interests.

Among the achievements of Duterte's unconventional and performative foreign policy approach are the rekindled ties with China, an agreement between ASEAN and China to protect the marine environment in the SCS, and some progress in the SCS Code of Conduct negotiations. However, critics were quick to point that Duterte was avoiding upsetting China or is prioritizing short-term economic gains for long-term strategic and territorial interests.¹⁰ Perhaps in Duterte's view, the task of checking China's assertiveness is a burden that the Philippines bore for several years but exacted a huge toll on the country's national interests. Unless other countries are willing to share and contribute to this goal, the Philippines under Duterte will carry

⁸ Jarius Bondoc, "Philippines seen backtracking on sea Code of Conduct," *Philippine Star*, August 22, 2017.

⁹ Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Duterte ends his colourful Asean lead role," *Bangkok Post*, November 14, 2017.

¹⁰ "Assessing Duterte's ASEAN Chairmanship," *Rappler*, November 16, 2017. In <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/188624-rodrigo-duterte-asean-2017-chairmanship-assessment-china>.

out a flexible and pragmatic approach with less emphasis on norms and values that have previously dictated its foreign policy.

It remains to be seen whether Duterte's foreign policy approach can simultaneously pursue Philippine national interests as well as the collective interests of ASEAN and other powers. The latter is contingent on the ability of ASEAN member-states to ensure that the organization continues to possess sufficient convening power to be a mechanism for regional peace, stability, and prosperity. If not, then the value of ASEAN for its members as well as dialogue partners will diminish and possible alternatives might supplant it.¹¹

The Security Sector as Duterte's Constituency

There is no doubt that Duterte admires and seeks to improve the lot of the country's security sector. He views it as a critical pillar in his pursuit of the Philippines for stability and development. The mobilization of the military's resources to carry out the president's orders was more evident this year as they have participated in the war against drugs, terrorists, insurgents, and other armed groups. The breakdown of the peace talks with the communist movement was a by-product of the loss of confidence and faith of the government as the latter remained to attack the military despite a truce. Duterte also has focused on military modernization as there is a 7.5% increase in the AFP's 2018 budget.¹² Unless there is a major breakthrough, it is expected that skirmishes between the New People's Army and the AFP will increase in 2018.

The Philippine government has also sought the help of other countries in its military modernization. Possible defense cooperation pacts are in the pipeline between the Philippines and other powers such as China, Russia, India, etc. Also, the outcomes of bilateral strategic dialogue with the US are expected to continue defense cooperation on terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster response. Finally, there continues to be good momentum for the security cooperation between the Philippines and Japan. The latter has remained steadfast in helping build the capacities of the

¹¹ Grace Guiang, "Are minilaterals the future of ASEAN security?" *East Asia Forum*, September 30, 2017. In <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/30/are-minilaterals-the-future-of-asean-security/>.

¹² "P140 B for military upgrade in 2018 budget," *Philippine Star*, July 25, 2017.

country's coast guard as well as other members of the Philippine security sector.¹³ If successful, this serves as a model of cooperation for other Southeast Asian countries.

However, Duterte has also implemented previous practices that have served the corporate interests of the military as well as the personal interests of its top brass. It seems like he is also adopting a “revolving door policy” just like his predecessors by accommodating as many military generals as possible to leadership positions even though they will only serve for a relatively short time. In the past, this has affected the ability of the military leadership to implement policies continuously and dispense their responsibilities effectively. Duterte also has appointed many retired generals to civilian posts, a long-held practice in the Philippines, and it could have negative repercussions for civilian control and democratic civil-military relations.¹⁴

Prospects

The Philippines under Duterte continued to steer a path of change but one that is paved with conflicts, violence, and insecurity. The year 2017 exposed all these lingering security issues but also revealed new fissures in the country's pursuit of a more stable polity and prosperous economy. It is expected that security issues will remain in Duterte's agenda even though his government will also be preoccupied with his campaign to change the country's constitution. Duterte's ambitious security agenda needs to have critical support from the country's political elites but also from the public at large. While the task of governing will entail some costs on his government's popularity, Duterte's leadership will be pivotal in convincing Filipinos to commit and support to the course he has set.

While domestic resources and capacities need to be exhausted to realize his security agenda, Duterte needs the help of other countries as well. While the first year of his presidency has set the basic contours of his foreign and security policy, the succeeding years are equally significant given the tremendous work that needs to be done in concretizing all the cooperation initiatives and agreements signed by the president. This requires the diligence and commitment of his foreign and security

¹³ “Japan to build four radar stations to help PH counter piracy surge,” *Manila Bulletin*, November 11, 2017.

¹⁴ “Duterte prefers military officials over loitering civilian execs in top gov't posts,” *GMA News Online*, August 5, 2017. In <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/620788/duterte-prefers-military-officials-over-loitering-civilian-execs-in-top-gov-t-posts/story/>.

policy bureaucracy. Duterte's ability to solicit the cooperation of other branches and institutions of government – legislature, judiciary, and the security sector – is also vital. There will be little success if there is no minimum consensus shared by all political actors in pursuing the security agenda Duterte has created. The worst case scenario is that the failure to improve security becomes an impetus for challenging his political legitimacy. But if Duterte and his government played their cards right, there is a possibility that the stability and prosperity that have long eluded Asia's greatest underachiever can be finally achieved.

